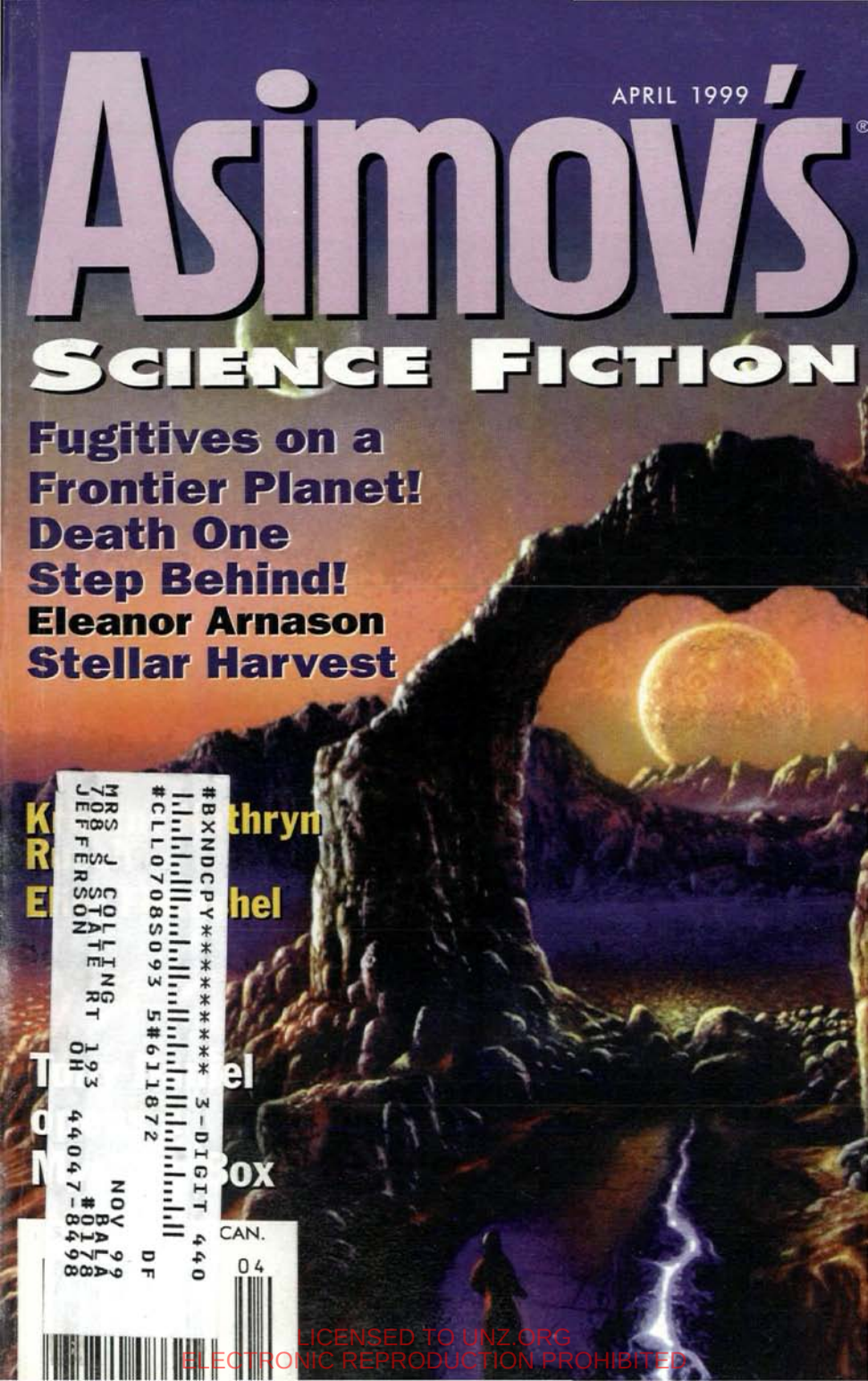

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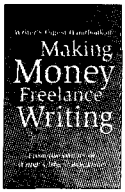

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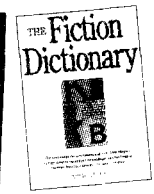

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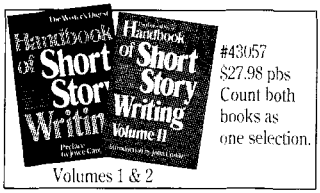

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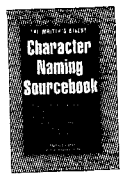

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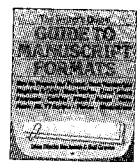

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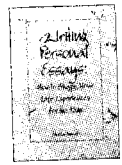

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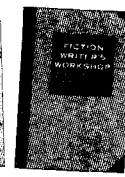

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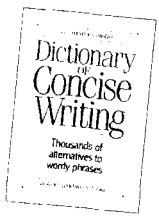

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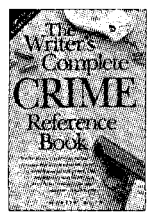

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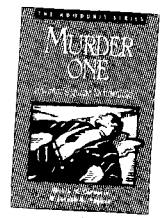

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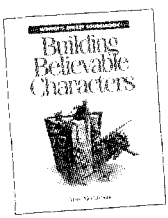

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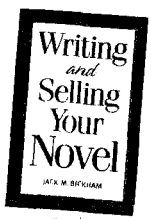

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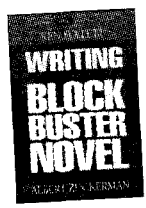

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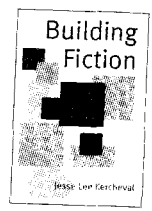

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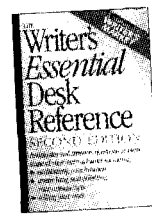

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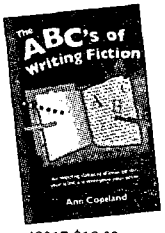

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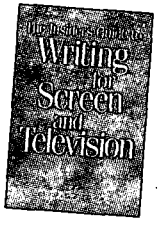

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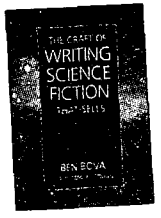

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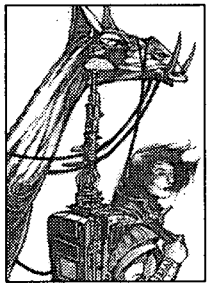

102

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NOVELETTES

10 Mystery Box — Tony Daniel
38 Bonding — Kristine Kathryn Rusch
58 Recalled to Home — Michael Armstrong
84 Iz and the Blue God — Eliot Fintushel
102 Stellar Harvest — Eleanor Arnason

SHORT STORIES

74 The Rumor of the Ruined City — Jeff Hecht

POETRY

36 Atlantis — Gustaf Fröding
(Translated from the Swedish by Judith Moffett)
131 Butterside Down — William John Watkins

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: Lost in Translation — Robert Silverberg
132 On Books — Paul Di Filippo
142 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

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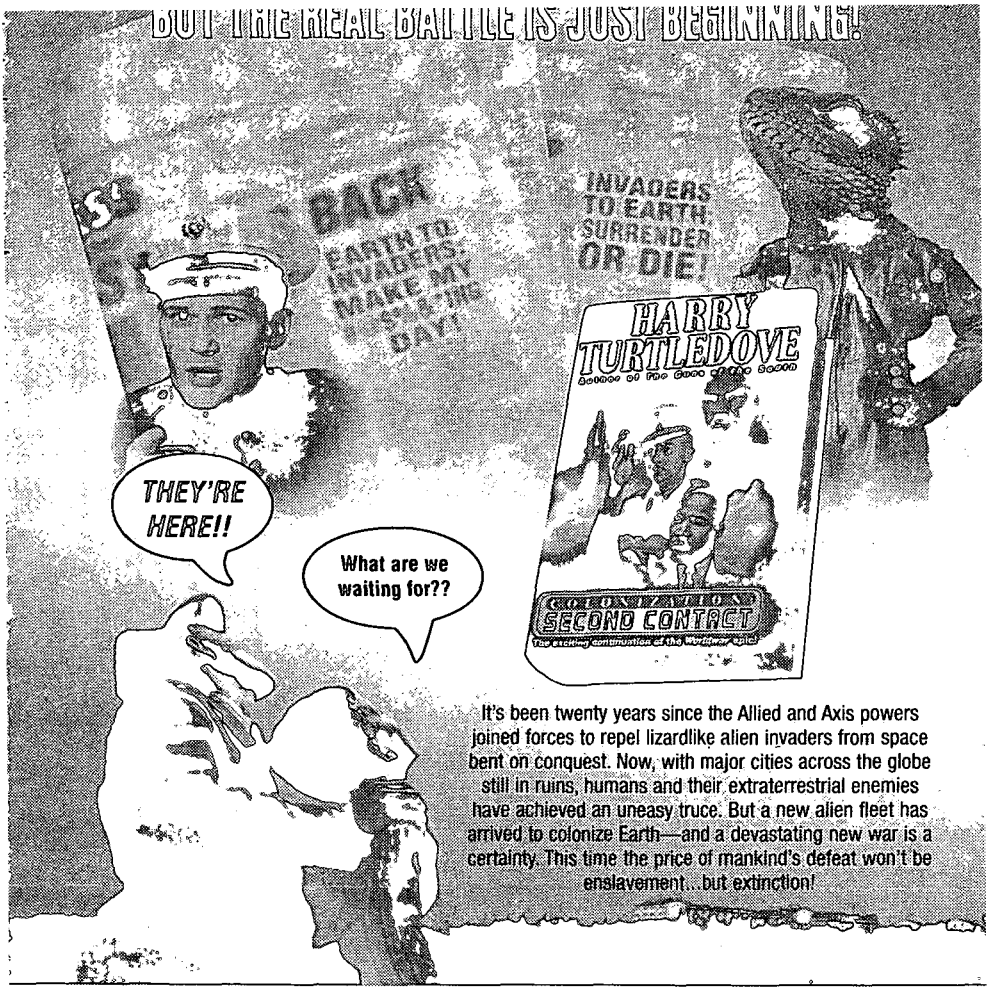
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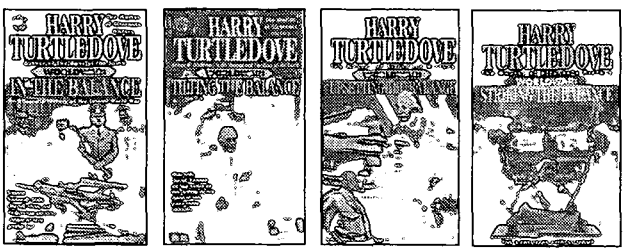

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LOST IN TRANSLATION

André Gide, the great French man of letters, was fluent in English and translated a number of English literary classics into French, including two of Shakespeare's plays. His translation of *Antony and Cleopatra,* done in 1917, went smoothly and swiftly for him. "I embrace Shakespeare's text with rapture and am extremely satisfied with certain pages," he noted in his journal for November 12 of that year. But when he tackled the far more complex *Hamlet* in July, 1922 he ran into great difficulties and abandoned the project after Act One, as this journal entry relates:

"I finish translating, this morning, the first act of *Hamlet* and give up proceeding further. I have spent three weeks on these few pages, at the rate of four to six hours a day. The result does not satisfy me. The difficulty is never completely overcome, and in order to write good French, one has to get too far away from Shakespeare. (It seems to me that this is peculiar to *Hamlet,* that the text of *Antony and Cleopatra* was much less thorny and allowed one to follow it better). . . . Certain of Shakespeare's sentences are as wily as the devil, full of redundancies. I should like an Englishman to explain their beauty to me. It must be very beautiful in English."

The problem that Gide faced was not so much that of translating the play literally as it was of bringing across both the music of its poetry and the inner meaning of its words. Earlier translators, he felt, had failed at this. "Marcel Schwob's translation," he wrote, speaking of a French version done around the turn of the century, "exact though it be, is obscure, almost incomprehensible in spots, amorphous, arhythmical, and as if unbreathable. . . . How it must have embarrassed the actors!"

I find two sentences in this passage from Gide's journal particularly poignant: "In order to write good French, one has to get too far away from Shakespeare" and "It must be very beautiful in English." How many science fiction stories have you read in which some sort of translating machine swiftly and glibly renders an alien language into brisk, idiomatic English? André Gide was no translating machine: he was a human being, a gifted poet and novelist with a marvelous ear for the subtleties of language. He understood our language well and regularly turned to the masterpieces of its literature for his reading: references to Whitman, Conrad, Milton, Shaw, Shakespeare, Donne, and Keats are found again and again in the journals. And yet even he, recognizing the great gulf in rhythm and texture that separates even such closely related languages as English and French, despaired of bringing *Hamlet* across that barrier in any accurate way, and wistfully expressed the desire to be able to hear Shakespeare's verbal music the way a native speaker of Shakespeare's language was able to do. Poor Gide! As any conscientious translator knows, a translation is only an approximation. But a translation of something as rich and intricate as *Hamlet*—!

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Gide did go on wrestling with *Hamlet* for much of his life, and finally did manage a complete translation, which was published in 1945. It was not the first time the play had been done in French, but, in an interview the following year, he spoke of "the fact that I have always felt something lacking in the earlier translations, something that I considered indispensable: the poetic as well as the musical essence that animates the play throughout; a kind of lyrical transposition of key, vibrating in a surcharged atmosphere that bathes the characters and colors their speeches. It seemed to me that my work would be in vain if I conveyed into the French no more than the meaning of these speeches, which a number of the earlier translators had rendered quite well, but at the cost of the rhythm, the rapture, and the peculiar latent music in which Shakespeare's genius sports." And he offers a dozen examples of the ways in which he had had to interpret and even to transform the literal meaning of Shakespeare's lines in order to convey what he believed those lines were really saying—all the while aware that he was dealing with a language that must always be inherently foreign to him and one, moreover, that had undergone great changes in the three centuries since Shakespeare had written.

It happens that my own work, like that of most well-known modern science fiction writers, is routinely translated into fifteen or twenty foreign languages: invariably French and German and Italian, often Spanish and Portuguese, and on and on, through Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Russian, Hebrew, and the various Scandinavian languages, to the occasional Thai, Korean, and Greek edition. Now, I am not Shakespeare and my style is reasonably straightforward

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and lucid; on the other hand, my translators, bless them, aren't André Gide, either, and I often wonder how closely their versions resemble what I've written.

Some of it must be pretty close. I've met many of my translators—the ones that come to mind first are Thomas Schlueck of Germany and Robert Louit, Philippe Hupp, Jacques Chambon, and Patrick Berthon of France—and they speak English easily and well. They also are often willing to question me by mail or even telephone about words or passages in my books that they find obscure.

But translation is not a highly paid profession; the job must be done quickly if the rent is to be paid; and I wonder about some of those translations done in smaller countries, where the translator could not have received more than fifty or a hundred dollars for doing the job. Does the "Silverberg" book they produce resemble in anything more than general outline the one that I wrote? I can hardly expect the characteristic flavor of my style to be carried over recognizably into Bulgarian or Czech; but do the books even make *sense* once translated? What if small distortions of meaning have crept in progressively, chapter by chapter, accumulating until, by the midway point, the story itself is incomprehensible? How could I tell? Even a bilingual Bulgarian or Czech might have trouble locating the points of divergence.

André Gide had a problem with Shakespeare because of the subtlety and complexity of Shakespeare's use of language: his lines are freighted with puns, double and triple meanings, deeply buried bawdy jokes, and much more that eludes the eye or ear of even the most attentive students today. The task of comprehending his texts must be far harder for someone to whom English is not native.

The translators of contemporary American science fiction, though, have a different and very dismaying challenge: not only must they, like all translators, cope with the constantly changing slang idioms of a foreign tongue, but they also have to deal now with the ever-increasing prevalence of sub-literate prose among writers and the inability of American editors to weed out these faulty constructions. How can a foreign translator, trained in grammatical English, make sense of prose that in fact should make no sense to native-born speakers of the tongue?

I've already spoken often enough here of such things as the confusing misuse of "fortuitous" to mean "fortunate" (it means "accidental") or "pen-ultimate" to mean "amazing and extraordinary" instead of "next to last." Translators are surely on guard against these things by now. They may also have succeeded in figuring out that weird self-contradicting phrase, "I could care less."

But lately I've been running into usages that baffle even my ear, and must certainly leave overseas English-speakers bewildered—such as the use of "substitute with" to mean "replace," as in, "We've substituted the shrimp with clams on today's menu." For me, "substitute" takes the preposition "for," and means "to put in the place of," from the Latin *substituere,* "to place underneath." Thus we say, "We are substituting X for Y." "Replace," which takes the preposition "with," requires the opposite construction: "We are replacing Y with X." My ear, cued by the verb "to substitute," is not expecting to hear about Y, the replacement, before X, the thing being replaced. So when the restaurant tells me that it's substituting the shrimp with clams, which is something I hear more and more often these days, I have to stop and translate the statement back into intelligible

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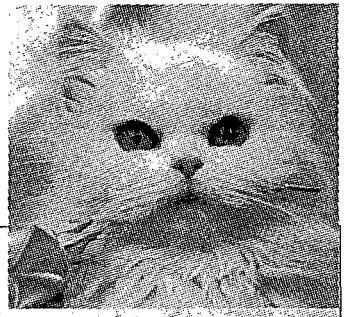

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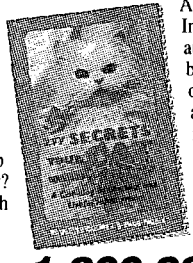

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English. I'm learning to do this. But what does the German or French translator do? Change the menu entirely, I suspect.

Then we have "lavish him with praise," "lavish her with diamonds," constructions that are returning to the language after an absence of several centuries. This one startled me, accustomed as I was to the modern "lavish praise upon him" and "lavish diamonds upon her." A little sniffing around showed me "they lavish gold out of the bag" in the King James translation of the Bible, and a similar use of the word in Shakespeare, and by now I'm able to cope with this recent shift of the object of the verb, bringing back the archaic word order. Are translators, though?

And then, all the little illiteracies of current American gibberish-English, both spoken and, alas, written—"too big of a task to do" and "enamored with her" and "between you and I"—do translators carry those over literally into their versions, rendering them in some klutzified pseudo-equivalent of their own languages? What about the myriad dangling participles and other misplaced modifiers that now bespeckle the books we read? ("Darkly handsome, his Levantine skin and deliberate speech conveyed a languor that masked his essential restlessness.") ("Of medium height and weight, her movements were quick and graceful, attending to the task with dedication.") Do the translators reproduce such stuff with exactitude, assuming that that's possible in their languages? If not, how do they decode it into something comprehensible?

The English language is a living, dynamic thing, and it's been changing constantly for many centuries, as anyone who's seen a page of Chaucer can testify. Nowadays, though, English-speaking people are spewing forth strange new grammatical constructions that have no syntactical or etymological logic behind them. When the changes in a language are degenerative rather than evolutionary—when it's no longer easy to tell whether some event is pleasing or merely accidental, and whether it's the shrimp that are replacing the clams or vice versa—then one is forced to regard them as pathological processes. When the intergalactic future arrives, the translating machines that are given the job of turning "Terran" into Betelgeusian will have to pin down the meaning of the garbled babble our spacemen are speaking before they can translate it for the benefit of aliens, and I think they're going to have a tough time of it. O

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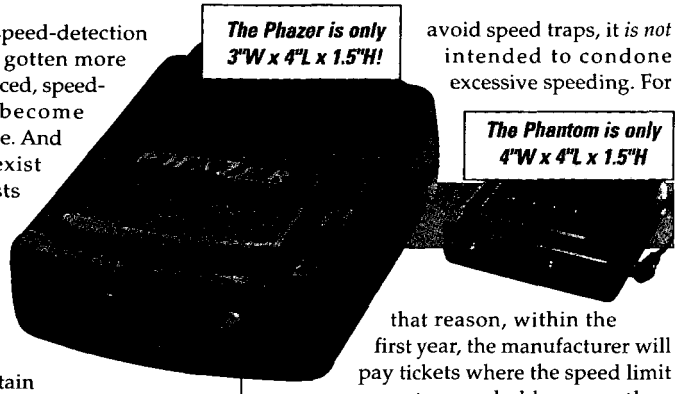

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Tony Daniel

MYSTERY BOX

Tony Daniel is currently at work on his next novel, *Metaplanetary*, and its sequel, *Superluminal*, for Harper/Prism. The first book will be released sometime next year. Both the intriguing "Mystery Box" and an earlier story, "Grist" (December 1998), are prequels to these novels. In addition to his fiction, Mr. Daniel is the host of a monthly radio show, "Automatic Vaudeville," on WBAI in New York City.

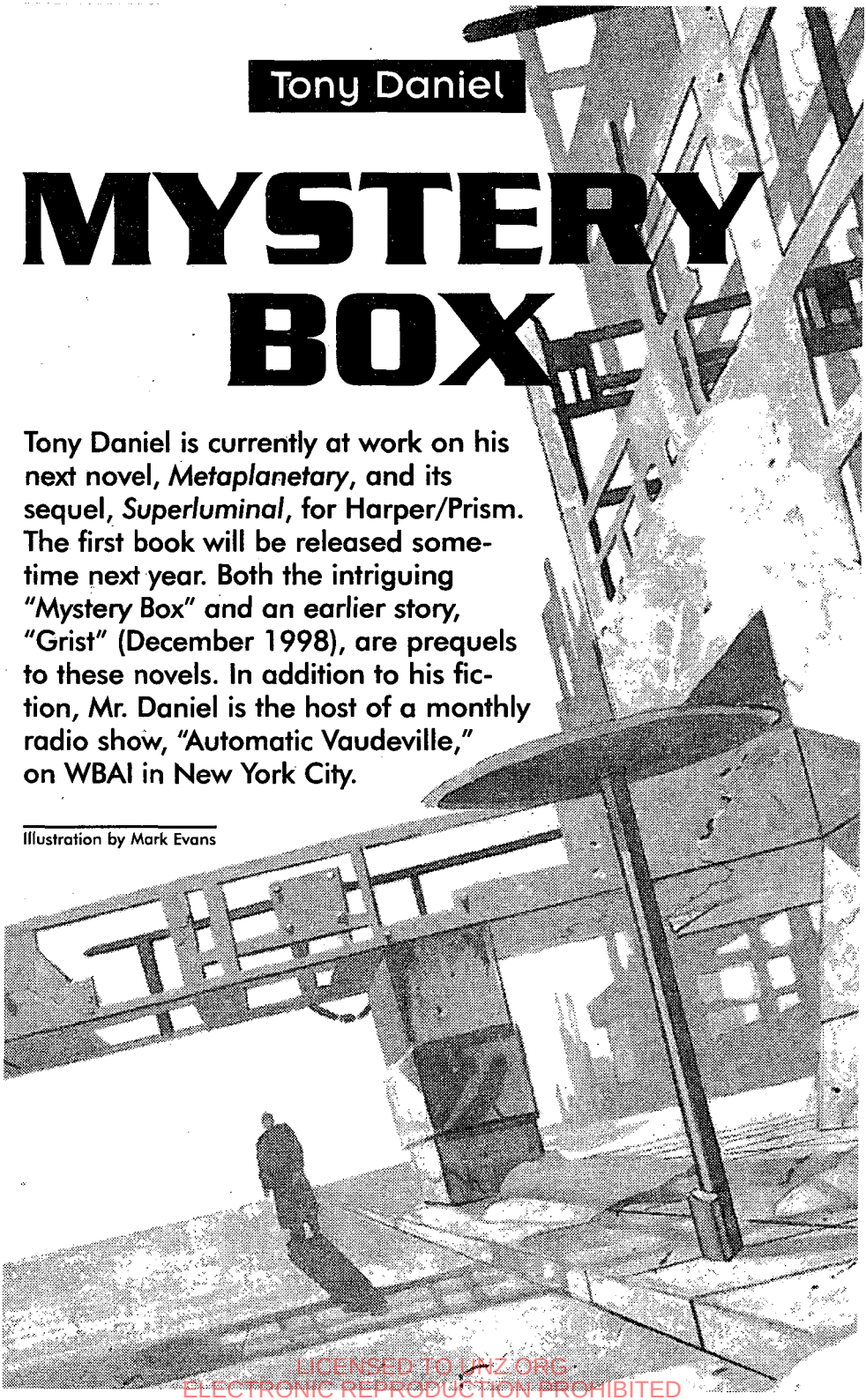

Illustration by Mark Evans

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A Circle Run

The man in the long coat walked down the streets of bone. The moon was shining on the sides of bone-white buildings and on the bone-white streets. The shadow the man cast as he walked was dark and lustrous—far more alluring than the man himself. He was nondescript, except for his eyes, which were sea-green and seemed to be illuminated from within. For a moment, the man felt observed and didn't like it. He looked up at the moon. There were more people up there than there were in New York. More than there were on Earth. The light from the moon was like their twilight, subconscious awareness, turned Earthward. Turned to him.

But that's only my imagination, C thought. Hardly anyone in space pays much attention to Earth, especially at night.

Tucked under C's arm was a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. There was no address on the package, but that was all right, because he wasn't delivering it anywhere. This was only the semblance of delivery. He found the corner that he wanted, Church and Canal in old Tribeca, and walked south down Church. Here the rogue strain of grist had transformed only the stone of the buildings to bone and not the metalwork. Something *had* gotten into the metal superstructure, though, because the fire escapes and iron ornamentation of the buildings had a blue tint to them, and were very brittle. There were places where the fire escapes had crumbled away in straight lines that mere rust would never have produced. More like broken ice.

But the air was not cold tonight. It was a mild October night, and he was glad he was wearing a coat with no quilted lining, even if it did flap a bit too much in the breeze. He wondered where he'd left the lining, but he couldn't remember. Probably somewhere in space, or back on Mercury. The lining was like a lot of things that way.

C found the address he was looking for, "Percepied Export." At the door, there was a broken iron grating pushed to the side. The outside windows were covered with sheet-metal roller casings that did not look as if they would be rolled up come daylight, or ever. He wondered what he might find in the spaces between the metal coverings and the windows behind them. Something lost from the last millennium, probably. For a moment, C pictured the three-hundred-year-old skeleton of a little girl stuck there, but shook the image from his head.

It wasn't preposterous, knowing what he did of New York. For three centuries, New York had made a fetish out of children. Dead children. Live, trapped children. Over the beds of old women you would find paintings of the Little Bone Boy, crying thick, chalky tears from enormous eyes that were, somehow, still a living brown. The steps of most brownstones had their guardian children, taken from the sections of the city that had turned to bone, as perpetual wards against the bone-change coming once again for the young.

And there were darker, sexual perversities that had arisen. C knew all about them. He'd been there when it all began.

He opened the door on Church Street and went in. There was a single, large room, twenty feet to the ceiling and maybe a hundred feet long and wide. The walls of the room were piled high with wrapped packages much like the one C held under his arm. In the center of the room was a cluster of desks. Three men and two women sat on battered chairs. Four of the five

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chairs had no back rests, but all of the people were hunched over their desks examining data pools, so the backrests didn't seem to matter. The men and women moved their fingertips over the desktops, touching the surface here and there, here and there, as if they were using fortune-telling boards or shuffling invisible gambling chips.

C came and stood quietly near the desks. After a moment, a woman at the biggest desk looked up.

"I have something for Mr. Percepied," said C.

The woman touched a spot on her desk, freezing the invisible swirl of data before her, C supposed. He could have attuned his grist outriders to examine what the woman was looking at, but it would be useless knowledge to him. Why soak up the entropy? Do only what needs doing.

"This is shipping," the woman said. "You want receiving."

"No," C replied. "I don't think so."

"Mr. Percepied hardly ever comes into the warehouse," the woman said. "I run things here."

"I was told Mr. Percepied comes in on Tuesdays," said C, "to buy for his personal collection."

"Oh," said the woman. She seemed startled, but quickly recovered herself. "I see. We've been expecting you. I'm Hecate Minim. You must be—"

"Mr. Cornell."

She stood up and stretched. She was tall, and had once been very beautiful. Now there was the red tinge of reparation grist to her skin, and her eyes were old—not the creases around her eyes, which were nonexistent, but the eyes themselves. They were the same startling green as his own.

Except I am even older than my eyes.

Despite her eyes, and for no reason that he could name, he associated the woman with the color brown. Like a moth. As he thought of his old friend, Jack Cureoak, the wandering moth of the solar system's night. This *was* Cureoak's daughter, after all.

"Mr. Percepied said you could leave whatever it is with me," Hecate Minim said.

C smiled sadly. "I'd rather give whatever it is to him," he said.

"That may not be possible," said Hecate Minim.

"It may not be," C replied evenly.

"Do you have it with you?"

"Shouldn't we go somewhere else?" C indicated the four other clerks sitting at their desks.

"They won't hear us," Hecate Minim said. "I'm on nightwatch this evening and I locked them in virtual as soon as you came in."

"You might be surprised what can seep into your dreams," said C.

"All right, then. Let me use the bathroom and get my coat," said the woman. She went to a closet in the back. C touched one of the men hunched over the desk. The man did not flinch or shudder. He moved his hands like insects across the wood grain of the desk surface. The woman returned wearing a coat of faded red wool. They went out into the night. She leaned against the broken iron door grate and got out a cigarette, shook it until it lit, then took two quick puffs. C noticed the brand of the cigarette, as he always did. Mandala 90s. She was breathing in a blend of marijuana and crazed Eastern logics from the keef farms out on the Gai radial, near Venus. But when she breathed out, the smoke smelled like hot sand. There must be new additives, C thought. Something all-consuming to make them smell that way.

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"Is there some place we could get a cup of coffee?" he asked her.

"Coffee?" she said. "Don't you mean whiskey?"

"I would rather drink coffee." On Earth, the drinking of coffee sometimes had peculiar connotations. But C saw no reason to explain to her that he didn't drink alcohol. He had watched what alcohol had done to Jack Cureoak. It had been enough to put him off drinking for three centuries.

"There's a place on Walker," she said. "But they have children."

"I just like coffee," said C. "That's all." They walked three blocks, saying nothing, and turned down a dark street. In the middle, they came to a black door. There were black metal letters on the door that C would not have been able to read had it not been for the moonlight. The letters said "Night Kindergarten."

The interior was lit with pinprick biolumins that twinkled like stars. Behind the coffee bar was a tank filled with preservative. A row of naked dead children was floating in it. Some were right side up; some were upside down, their hair trailing about them in the gooey liquid like rays of sun. The tank was long but narrow, and it held their bodies up against the glass. They were backlit with a blue-green lamp.

From the far rear, behind heavy black curtains, came the whimpers of the live children. Or, in truth, they would be adults who had been modified to look like children, thought C, if this place were on the up-and-up. But the grist could remake a body from the DNA up, so it was hard to tell what was really back there. The patrons could well imagine that they were groping an actual child. At twenty greenleaves for each copped feel, the kids did their best to keep up the illusion.

C remembered two hundred years before, when coffee had first started to be associated with pederasty. Now it was one of the famous forbidden attractions of old New York.

They ordered two smalls. Hecate Minim took hers dark and sweet. C, of course, took his coffee regular, like everything else. Leaving no trace was the way to stay alive.

They sat down at a table near the front where the childish whimpering wouldn't drown them out.

"Have you considered the possibility that I *am* Mr. Percepied," said Hecate Minim.

"Of course I have," C replied. "But there are certain quantum fluctuations that I am sensitive to that tell me otherwise." Of course there weren't, or at least none that he knew of, but Hecate Minim likely wouldn't know that. In many ways, Earthers were the most provincial people in the solar system.

"I see," she said. She sipped her coffee and a bit of brown lipstick came off on the cup's brim. The grist in the lipstick quickly sensed that it was no longer connected to its larger algorithm, and began the migration back to the penumbra of Hecate Minim's body. The lipstick smear faded away. C pictured all the lost bits of humanity forever following each human body around, perpetually trying to reconnect, but the body keeps moving ahead. Until it doesn't. When we die, the rest of us finally catches up, thought C.

He drank his coffee. It was tepid, with too much milk, and these mugs were not self-heating. He set the cup down.

"I have some memories for Mr. Percepied," he said. He had put the package on the floor beside his chair. Hecate Minim gazed down at it.

"There?" she said. "You're just carrying them around?"

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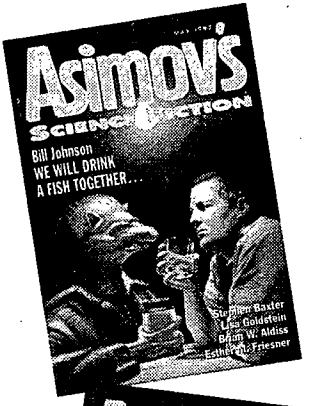

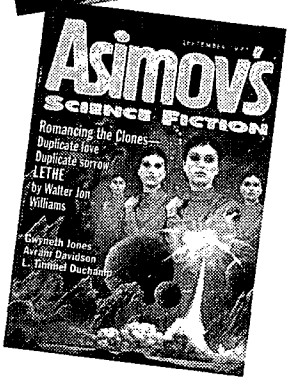

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"That's all you can do with memories, isn't it?" he said. "But they're not in the box. The box is something else."

She sat back, regained her composure. Her hair was black, but her eyebrows were light brown. Her skin was Caucasian, tanned—but that was only the grist. C doubted that Hecate Minim got out in the sun very much.

"He'll want to know what you've got," she said.

"Something unique," C replied. "Something from the twenty-eighth century. A manuscript. The only copy of an unpublished poem. With memory latencies."

"What is it?"

"A page from a poet's notebook. It's really quite amazing. The guy must have had a hell of a mind for observation, down to the quantum level. These may be the oldest set of memory imprints that have ever been recovered."

"You've seen it?"

"Only a thumbnail."

"Who is it?"

"You should ask me *what* is it," C said.

"Well," said Hecate Minim. "What?"

"It's a murder," C replied. "The memory of killing a woman with a knife."

"A knifing. That's not so unusual. You can buy knifings by the dozen over on Canal Street."

"No," said C. "This is different."

"How different? Who is the writer?"

"Jack Cureoak."

Hecate sat back, unconsciously licked her lips. She was very good not to give anything else away. She moved up a notch in C's admiration. "My," she said. "Really? Cureoak? The guy who wrote the poems about the outer system?"

"*Desolate Traveler* is the most famous book. And the others."

"We are definitely interested, but—"

"There's something else."

"What you've got is already pretty good."

"There's no record."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's well established that Cureoak never killed anybody. He was a pacifist. They drafted him into the navy, but he got drummed out during the unrest in the asteroid belt. He could barely bring himself to defend *himself* in a fight. But there is a record for a man named Clare Runic. Clare Runic knifed a woman named Mamery St. Cloud to death in 2744."

"I don't see—"

"Clare Runic was Cureoak's best friend at the time."

"I don't understand."

"Cureoak did it. Clare Runic took the rap."

"That was three hundred years ago. Who cares?"

"Mr. Percepied will care."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I know who Mr. Percepied is."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"That hardly matters," C replied. He drained the rest of his coffee, lukewarm or not. "Tell him I have the manuscript and the only copy of the latencies. Tell him that there is only one payment that I'll take for them."

"How much do you want?" asked Hecate Minim. "Percepied Export

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makes a small profit selling Earth memorabilia, but I promise you that Mr. Percepied himself is not a wealthy man in any sense of the word."

"Don't worry. Even if he were rich, he wouldn't have enough money. He never could," C said. "There is only one thing I want from Mr. Percepied. Tell him I want Cassady-13."

"You're talking gibberish."

For the first time in weeks, C laughed aloud. "Yes," he replied. "I am. Exactly."

"I have to get back to work," Hecate Minim said, attempting to appear indignant, but seeming flustered instead. "Where can we contact you?"

"I have a signifier at the Hotel Egypte on Fifty-Ninth Street."

"That's up in bone country."

"Indeed," said C. "I'm registered under the name of Cornell. Joseph Cornell."

"You say your name like it's not your name at all."

C laughed again. "It may very well be my name, my dear," he said. "And, in any case, it will do."

"All right," said Hecate Minim. "I'll tell Mr. Percepied. But it may be *me* that you have to deal with."

"It is a matter of complete indifference," C replied. "All I want is Cassady-13."

Hecate Minim gathered her coat and left. After a moment, C reached over and touched the cup brim that she had just drunk from. He closed his eyes and felt the remains of her grist there, frantically seeking its mistress. But she was gone. C put the grist to his lips.

Hecate in her building. The citizens of New York could have entire buildings to themselves these days, if they wanted. Some had complete blocks.

Somewhere in Chelsea. From her window, Hecate could see the Jersey shore across the Hudson. Jersey gone back to swamp and mosquitoes. Somewhere out there in the mud they had buried the Chrysler Building after it went on its rampage and had to be taken down with a missile.

Hecate setting down groceries. A rustle in the back of her musty living room. Faint light on a wan face. Cigarette smoke rising in moted sunlight.

"Did you get the eggs?"

"No, Papa, I forgot to—"

The vision faded and there was something else in the grist remnant, something familiar, a memory of a memory. . . .

But then the feeling faded and that was all C could recover from the grist. It was enough. He went to the coffee bar and got a refill. From the back, a child cried out.

"There, there," said a man's simpering voice. "There, there."

C used the coffee to wash down the last traces of Hecate Minim.

Uracil Cern

C wandered the city in a purely random manner for the next day and a half. He couldn't sleep. In fact, C had not been able to sleep for centuries. The ability to sleep was something he'd lost as he went through more and more duplications of himself. Eventually, the heightened, knife-edge sensitivity of insomnia became his natural state. Now he could hardly remember what it was like to be relaxed to the point of unconsciousness.

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The real ossification of the city had started in the upper thirties of Manhattan, and, north of there, the city was completely white. The epicenter was at Broadway and 116th, at the old site of Columbia University, but the bone-change had radiated far out into Queens, taken all of the Bronx. And Brooklyn? Brooklyn was a dangerous place. He'd only been there a few times and had no wish to return. Rogue grist still roamed the avenues, and only the grist knew Brooklyn.

The sun was hot in the bone canyons of midtown. The street cleaning grist was functioning still in most parts of the city. It took the form of little rain clouds that moved along in ragged lines an inch above the streets. Seen from above, the sweeper clouds looked exactly like the miniature version of a storm front moving over a continent of Earth. When they reached an obstruction, they analyzed to determine whether the obstruction was alive. If the blockage was inorganic or dead—and small—the grist broke it down. If it was big and dead, the grist sweepers cleaned it and left it there. Something had gone corrupt in the algorithm, however, and the sweepers did not recognize about a third of the streets. On these streets, the bone dust, weathered over the years from the buildings, piled up in drifts or mingled brownly with the other residue of the city. Some of these drifts were hardened to a chalk by decades of rain, but mostly the worn bone remained in loose grain form. When a wind picked up, particles swirled in choking clouds from hidden alleys and side streets. On most autumn days, you could not walk the streets of New York north of Forty-second Street without getting your clothing thoroughly plastered with bone dust.

At one point on a purely random street that the sweepers had missed, C leaned over, and, with his finger, took a sample of the bone from a drift. Surrounding C (surrounding almost every human being these days) was his own pellicle of grist, a kind of invisible armor of information and calculation embodied in micromachines. It was *him* as much as the meat and blood of his body were him. Maybe it was *more* him, since he had often had other bodies—growing them and shucking them like ears of corn—but his pellicle retained more or less the same programming. Perhaps that was his secret identity after all these years, hidden in the grist. Maybe all he really was was a disembodied thought.

No. I'm a man.

He turned his pellicle to analyzing the bone sample.

The bone was as he'd left it three hundred years before, and still holding what it held within its calcium interstices, its hard-sponge caverns.

What it held—what it was designed to contain—was the Harmony code. And attached and interwoven with the code was a youthful copy of the man who was now the ruler of the inner solar system.

Let me out!

C gasped, stopped in the street, and leaned against a lamp post to catch his breath. After all these years, the ghost of Amés was still so potent! The man within the trapped code wanted to be free. No, more than that. He wanted to *rule*. To dominate.

Everything.

Let me out and things will go easy on you!

"Don't worry," C said, though the trapped code could not hear him. "You've given me no choice in the matter."

Let me out. Let me stop the chaos! You need me. Everyone needs me to tell them what to do. Let me out before it's too late!

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With a shudder, C dropped the bone fragment.

I tried to stop him, C thought, but I only made things worse.

He had gotten what he wanted from the analysis, however. The schematics for opening up the bone lock overlaid his vision in glowing purple. He filed them away. But understanding the mechanism of the lock was the easy part. Now he had to get the *key:* the skeleton key that he had hidden so long ago, after he had turned it in its lock.

Cairn Cruel

Columbia University, 2744. Wilson Lab, Dodge Hall. Columbia, once a great university of the land, now become an academy of spies for the most part. Met Intelligence had bought the place years before, when it had gone bankrupt during the first exodus from Earth. Now they ran the college as a front. Most of the halls of higher learning had become a twisted shadow of themselves, breeding warrens for codes and ciphers. But Columbia suited Clare Runic. He had been perfectly content to move from studying philosophy there as an undergraduate to his graduate work in cryptology.

His best friends from his college days were still living in the neighborhood. Jack Cureoak, of course, never had any intention of going into the intelligence services, but inertia kept him in the same apartment that he and Clare had shared as undergraduates. He wanted to write, but this was before he had discovered his true subject and calling: restless travel about the solar system. He was waiting for the impetus to get on the road.

And also in the apartment: Mamery St. Cloud, Cureoak's friend and Clare's lover. She was working at Columbia on a project with a curious code name: "Harmony." Her boss and the head of the project team was a man named Amés. Everyone said he had a genius for administration. Things got done when Amés was in charge. Everyone also said that if you disagreed with him or got in his way, he became a real asshole.

Mamery St. Cloud disagreed with Amés and got in his way.

She believed that nanotechnology should not be used for military purposes. In the lab, she acquired a complete copy of the code that the team was working on and reverse-engineered a palliative strain. Wilson Lab was extremely secure. The only way to smuggle out the antivirus was to make it part of her own genome.

She thought she had gotten away with it.

"I may not be as smart as Jack or as clever as you are, Clare, but I know the difference between right and wrong," she said to him one night. They had made love not long before, and both of them were smoking cigarettes. She smoked Petra Ultralites back then. He smoke Mandala 75s. "Something is wrong with that code."

"Morality can't be written into an algorithm," Clare said. "Code is just code."

She climbed on top of him and sat there, still smoking. Mamery was so slight and thin he could hardly feel her upon him.

"Well, maybe not *your* code." She reached behind her back to grab him. Clare felt himself getting hard once again in her hand. It was so easy back then, when there wasn't so much to think about all at once. "But *some* code is bad," Mamery said.

He leaned up and licked Mamery's nipple. "Your code is good," Clare said.

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"A '20, if I'm not mistaken. Excellent vintage." They ground out their cigarettes in an ashtray and made love again in the smoky night.

There were secret detectors in the lab. Spies in the walls. Amés found out that Mamery had taken away a Harmony antivirus.

She *did* get the antivirus back to the apartment. She scraped off a patch of her skin and put it in a sequencer (people had genetic sequencers back then that sat on tables and were as big as a fist).

Between the time when the sequencer finished its work and was downloading into the apartment's computer storage, Paranoia 4.1a, the military grist that Amés had sent out looking for her . . . found her. By the time a copy of the antivirus was streamed into Clare's virtual space, the Paranoia had control of Mamery's brain, and Mamery St. Cloud wasn't really herself ever again.

Paranoia was a very subtle security grist, used for counter-insurgency warfare. It would take weeks before Clare and Cureoak realized that something was terribly wrong with Mamery.

It took Clare two days to find the antivirus that she had downloaded into his computer. But he found it and realized almost immediately what it was.

Only he didn't quite realize how strong it was. What a good job his lover had done. That she'd used part of her human bone-making DNA to construct the Harmony lock-down code.

But when Amés released the Harmony code into the municipal grist of New York one morning at dawn, Clare was ready with the antidote. Within hours, Mamery's bone-change had caught up with Harmony. During that time, most adults had time to flee the infected areas. But there was simply not time for a general evacuation. And one bureaucrat failed to notify another bureaucrat in the school system. Random chance and obstinacy. The schools didn't get called until it was far too late.

It was all explained as a big mistake that science would eventually take care of. Even then, the politicians were afraid to mess with the spies of Columbia.

Nobody got caught, Clare thought, when he was sitting in prison on Ganymede and considering that the crime he was serving time for was perhaps the only one he could never have committed. When he was bending his mind to unraveling time-based ciphers and the ironies of cause and effect in a quantum universe.

When he came up with the idea for the box.

Curran Lice

Report!

The word exploded like a sun inside C's head. Oh Christ, it was so loud! This time, he fell to his knees in the street. He held his head and moaned. It was the quantum communicator that Amés had encoded into his grist before he'd left Mercury. Amés knew instantly when C had accessed the Harmony code. That must have been some sort of trigger. And now he was blasting like a megaphone into C's language centers.

It was like Mamery, when Mamery got the dose of Paranoia and went crazy. She was in your face. You couldn't ignore her, and you couldn't get away from her. Her code had gone bad.

And you couldn't kill her, no matter how much you wanted to, because you once had loved her.

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Amés's blasting voice made C feel as old and ineffectual as he had the day that he'd realized that Mamery was going to end up killing him and there was nothing he would or could do about it.

"I haven't got the key," C moaned. "Could you modulate your voice a little, sir? You're blowing my mind."

Get up and walk. You make me sick. This is all your fault. Think about that.

He got up. He walked. It was necessary to do Amés's bidding. Necessary for survival.

God, Amés sounded like Mamery when she was ill. Absolutely certain of herself. Absolutely certain that you must see that her way was the best and only way, even though it was clearly insane to anyone else.

C did what Amés wanted him to do. He continued down the lonesome streets. He thought about what Amés wanted him to think about, but he would have been doing so anyway. It was unavoidable, here in the bone canyons of midtown under the noonday sun.

New York, empty skull of a city. All your brains have blown out into space. I started it all. I started it when I changed the children. I had to stop Amés; I had to stop the Harmony code from binding all the Great Intelligences, the Large Arrays of Personalities, to Amés's will. I thought I had to stop Amés no matter what the consequences. But after the bone-change, who would want to stay in such a petrified place as New York? Only the depraved and the hopeless. Dregs and mold and detritus.

It gives me great pleasure to have sent you *to release the Harmony code.* Amés was a bit less forceful in his mind. He was speaking to C from New Hierarchy Central, deep within the great halls of Mercury, but he still sounded as if he were standing right next to him. Too close for comfort. *That's why I will not wipe your sneaking filth of a life from existence, Mr. C, now that I'm the boss of you. It gives me great pleasure to have sent you because the solution is so balanced and so beautiful, using you.*

"Yes sir. I have made contact with the subject and I am approaching him about the matter we discussed."

You can speak freely, Mr. C. Quantum transceiving cannot be intercepted.

Maybe not yet, thought C, but every professional bone in his body told him that there was *no* form of communication that couldn't be spied upon somehow or another.

"Cureoak couldn't be blackmailed," C said. "So tomorrow I'm going to kidnap his daughter and exchange her for the Cassady-13 key."

It was a lie, of course. But the ultimate outcome *would* be true in a matter of hours. Of that, C was confident. Time would tell. He must have sounded confident, for Amés chuckled. It resounded in C's mind like a beaten bell. Once again, he collapsed to one knee, then pulled himself upright.

You are a ruthless piece of garbage, Mr. C. I'll give you that. Not a shred of honor among spies, eh?

"Not unless honor happens to be expedient, sir."

C touched his temples. They were damp and hot. The sun was directly above, and he felt as if the sun were both outside and inside his head. As if he were standing in the stark, merciless landscape of his own imagination.

"Sir, you are killing me with this transmission. You took out my band filters, remember?"

I wanted to remind you of what could happen. Of how it will be if you fail in your assignment.

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"I understand."
Do you?
"I understand what I am, sir."
What is that?
"A means to an end."
My end.
"Yes, sir."

There *was* a certain symmetry, C thought. You had to give Amés that. Amés was a man of undeniable genius. He'd gotten control of all those interlocking directorates and authorities of the inner system Met, and he was using them. It was a great project that in many ways was also a worthy project. In the last hundred years, the Met—the great spread of interplanetary cables between the inner planets—had gotten congested and complacent. The outer system was steadily eating the business and the power away from the center, like a school of piranhas taking bite after bite out of a living carcass. Amés had tapped into the outrage of that old, wallowing monster. He was about to lead it to war against the outer system colonials.

But the Harmony code was something else again. It was the one step he had not been able to take to obtain complete control. Its lack over the years was the thorn in his lion's paw—for the Met was inoculated *against* Harmony. Whenever the Harmony code was deployed, Mamery's bone-change would follow in an instant. At the moment, Amés was a Napoleon or Caesar. With the Harmony code operational he would be . . .

I am as a pianist to the piano, Mr. C. You *are the central key that I am now striking. You are the first note in a great symphony that I will play upon the Met. You are part of a new and mighty song. You should feel lucky.*

"Oh, I do," C said to him. "I live to serve." Which was another lie he was telling Amés, but also, in a way, the genuine truth.

C had journeyed to Earth to do the bidding of the man who'd become his boss after digging him up from the little corner of Met Intelligence that C had established and for which he was the sole operative: The Crypto-horology Division. It had been years since he'd done field work. For the past decade, he'd been lost in the backwater area of horologic ciphering—safe, he thought, from notice from above. But Amés had found him, and doing Amés's bidding was part of the job now. Before Amés had taken power, it had been C's duty to oppose him. Now Amés was the boss, and C was back on Earth, responding once again to Amés's drive to power.

I should feel lucky, C thought. Lucky to be alive. Freedom is a bit much to ask for, under the circumstances.

Farther. Show me what you see.

Amés's transceiver was patched into C's visual centers, and he could look through C's eyes if he wanted.

Keep walking. Keep walking. Here. Yes, HERE!

C grasped his head and fell, his knees and elbows skidding on bone.

You did this.

A playground. Children streaming out the door, frozen now. Their faces bewildered, terrified, determined to get away as they see something really bad is coming. Something really bad and horribly white. But they could not get away. Burning sun on their white, unchanging faces. Pigeon shit on their shoulders and heads.

You did this. Now undo *it! And tell me in good faith that you don't deserve to be a slave.*

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They can't see me, C told himself again and again. And even if they could, *they* wouldn't know what I did.

C felt a sudden chill at his back and a storm front of street-sweeping grist moved through. It saw that he was alive, parted, and moved around him, as if he were a great mountain blocking its path.

But the grist went to clean the children. Almost gently, little clouds of rainy grist swarmed over their still forms. The bird shit was wiped away, and declivities where there used to be eyes and mouths were swabbed. The grist washed the bone children clean.

Then, just as suddenly as it arrived, the street-sweeping grist moved on, leaving behind a playground of gleaming, motionless children, still damp but quickly drying. They seemed to be staring at C with tears in their eyes. But that was only from the cleaning grist.

They can't see me, C thought. They can't see me, and they're not crying. They can't cry. The children can't see me because they have been changed to bone.

Ire Can Curl

Mamery's mental state got worse and worse. She stopped going to work. Clare and Cureoak fed her and tried to watch over her. But the more they did for her, the more her induced psychosis told her that they were trying to manipulate and hurt her. Of course, Mamery and Clare could no longer be lovers. And, after a time, Clare discovered that he did not love the person Mamery had become. But as his love waned, Mamery became obsessed with Clare. If she couldn't have him, she was going to make sure no one else ever could.

He locked her out of his room, and she had taken to climbing out on the fire escape and sneaking in his window at night. She would stand for hours over his sleeping form. Once, he'd woken up to find her in his room, looking down at him and holding a pair of scissors over his heart.

Then, on August 13, 2744, Clare woke up near dawn with a dark form standing over his bed, holding a bloody knife. At first, he thought it was Mamery and this was finally it. He didn't want to die, but there was nothing he could do about it.

But it wasn't Mamery; it was Jack Cureoak.

"Well, I killed her," Cureoak said. "I tried for two days to get hold of a gun, but nobody would sell me one." He sat down on the foot of the bed, moved into the moonlight that was streaming through the window. He put his bloody hand on his head. "No, no, no," he said. "Nobody would sell me a gun, so I had to do it with a knife."

"Where?" Clare said. It was the first thing he thought of to ask.

"In the park. Down by the river. I threw her in afterward. So help me, Clare, I tried to weigh her down with rocks, but it didn't work. Didn't work, and she floated away."

Cureoak gasped, but it seemed he could not cry.

"I watched her floating away," Cureoak said. "I've never killed anything in my life. Anyone. I watched her floating away dead down that river."

The first thing Clare felt was a tremendous sense of relief. He'd spent the last weeks believing in his heart that Mamery was going to kill him. He was only waiting to see how it would happen. Everything had been muddled and

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dark, but now it was suddenly clear. He knew immediately what he had to do. There was no question that Cureoak would go to prison. Clare knew that Jack Cureoak would die in prison, like a moth beating against a window for the light of day. It was clear that the first thing to do was to take care of his friend.

"Give me the knife," he said to Cureoak.

At the touch of the knife hilt to his hand Clare felt the awful clarity setting in permanently, the insomniac's night vision.

"I can't ever kill another thing," Cureoak said. "That was all the killing I have in me. I don't know if *I* can live, now. How am I going to live?" Cureoak sobbed, choked it back again. He rubbed his face and belly. He rubbed his hands and stared at them. "I think I broke something," he said.

"In your hand?" said Clare. But he knew that wasn't what Cureoak was talking about.

"No. Something that's not going to mend."

"You saved my life." Clare sat up in his bed, in the awful light of knowledge that he knew would never leave him now. "I'm going to help you, Jack."

"I don't think you can."

"I can try."

"Crutch," Cureoak said. "I need a crutch." Those were the last words he uttered that night. He finally broke into wave after wave of sobs. Clare made them both coffee and began planning what they would do in the morning after the body was found.

He would help Cureoak. That came first.

And then, some day, somehow, he was going to get back at the man named Amés. He was going to hurt Amés as much as Amés had hurt Mamery. He was going to twist Amés's soul as mercilessly as the man had darkened the pure and kind soul of Jack Cureoak. He was going to get back at Amés. Even if it took a thousand years. Even if he had to knock all of time out of kilter to do it.

Then he could sleep.

Carr Nuclei

C was the sole rider on an R train when the call finally came from Mr. Percepied. He emerged on a corner near the Flatiron Building on 23rd Street. The Flatiron's windows were calcified, except for one clear window near the top that somehow had escaped the bone-change grist.

It began to rain. C went to the only automat that was still open in this abandoned sector, as per instructions from Hecate Minim. He arrived first and found a booth near the back of the store. There was the ozone-and-peaches smell of malfunctioning grist coming from the cooking machinery, and C skipped the food that was available. He contented himself with another cup of coffee, this time without milk. It tasted faintly of roast beef.

The rain grew harder outside, and Hecate Minim entered holding a paper bag over the heads of Mr. Percepied and herself. When she took it down, there was no doubt about whom C was looking at.

Mr. Percepied was Jack Cureoak.

Older, wrinkled, leaning on a cane. There wasn't any regeneration grist that could take you past three hundred all in one piece.

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Will he recognize me after all these years? C wondered. But there's hardly any chance of that when I can't even recognize myself.

Hecate Minim slid into the booth across from C and Cureoak creakily took a seat beside her, dripping wet.

"Hello, Clare," he said. "I thought you were dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about," C replied. "But I've come with a proposition for you."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cureoak said. "It doesn't matter any more. I traveled to Pluto and back and wrote my books about it all. I'm not nearly so afraid of the big house as I was back then. For Christsake, Clare, I've been all the way out to *Charon!* Do your worst; do your worst."

"You couldn't possibly be Cureoak," C said. "Cureoak drank himself to death in 2767. I've done a lot of research on this."

"Yes, yes," the old man said. "And you couldn't possibly be Clare Runic. That would be preposterous." He smiled like a crack in the sky. "Yes, well. I'm close enough for government work. First generation dupe. First generation that there *were* dupes. Which of us wrote which books, do you think? How can it possibly matter?"

"Cureoak drank himself to death."

"I'm the Cureoak who didn't drink himself to death, who wrote the other books after *Desolate Traveler,* then went into hiding. Wrote what I had to write, then went on to something *else.*" He looked tenderly at Hecate. "I always wanted a family and I couldn't because of my art. Then Hecate showed up. Do you remember Daphne Minim, that girl I had the affair with during our freshman year? Who'd have thought it would give me comfort in my old age? You never know what you think you know, Clare. You never do."

"It is not my intention to blackmail you." Though of course that was exactly C's intention, in a way. He had to create the appearance of blackmail, so that no matter what, Cureoak would not give him the Cassady-13 code today. But he must not alienate the man so that he couldn't obtain the code *tomorrow.*

Timing was everything in this operation.

"I don't know what the hell this Cassady-13 is that you are asking about."

C almost believed him. But Cureoak had always been such a goddamn good storyteller. Liar. Both of us were gifted in that way, C thought. Maybe that's why we became friends.

"All right," C said. "This is what I have." He took an envelope from the pocket of his coat and placed it on the table.

Cureoak looked long and hard into C's eyes for a moment, then reached over and picked it up. He tore the end off the envelope and blew into it to puff it open. He tapped it against the table, and the poem fell out. He thumbed apart the folded sheet and looked down at the words. Old, old words.

Clare

They never heard of him
down at the office
although he is well known
in his field and
a kind of genius, I think

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* * *

He lurks in tight spaces
He mixes dark soup with a hammer
Don't trust him with truths
you don't want unraveled

At dawn, there is dew
the web

"It's just a poem I once wrote," he said. "For an old friend to take with him to a sad place he had to go."

He dropped it on the table between them. Hecate quickly reached out to keep it from falling into a ring of coffee that C's cup had left. But then, watching the look of amazement on her face, C tipped his coffee over and trickled some *onto* the poem until it formed a puddle on the paper.

"What are you doing? The memory imprints . . ."

"There never were any recovered memories," C said. "This paper is much too old for that. And besides . . ." He moved the paper about so that the coffee coated all of the poem. "I *thought* this coffee was damned acidic. Look how fast it's working."

On the note, behind the poem, words began to arise where before there had been nothing. Words written in big block letters.

"Read between the lines," said C.

I, JACK CUREOAK, KILLED MAMERY ST. CLOUD. I AM SORRY FOR HER, BUT I AM NOT SORRY THAT I DID IT. SHE WAS GOING TO END UP KILLING MY FRIEND, CLARE RUNIC, AND THERE WAS NO WAY TO DISSUADE HER. CLARE COULD NOT BRING HIMSELF TO DO IT, AS SHE WAS A FORMER LOVE OF HIS. I AM WRITING THIS FOR CLARE RUNIC, IN CASE THEY DECIDE TO HANG HIM, WHICH I HEAR THEY STILL SOMETIMES DO OUT ON GANYMEDE. CLARE IS GOING TO PRISON IN MY PLACE. HE IS LIKE A BROTHER TO ME.
—JACK CUREOAK, OCTOBER 30, 2744

"Invisible ink," said Hecate Minim. "How quaint."

"If you really are Clare, then you know why I can never give you that code." Cureoak looked at the note again. "Anyway, isn't there a statute of limitations after three hundred years?"

"It isn't the three-hundred-year-old Cureoak who is going to be punished."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"There was another download. In 2765."

"Oh," said Cureoak. "Oh, my. I didn't know that. Why would I do that?"

"He was drunk. Why did he do anything when he was drunk?"

"I don't know. *I* stopped drinking so that I could write."

"Nobody knows why he made the dupe."

"What is he talking about, Papa?" Hecate said.

"There was an archive in an old database," C said. "I found it. I find everything. And when Amés took over the Met government last year, he found *me*."

"Who are you?" Hecate said. "Why did you have to come here?"

"Your father and I went to school together," C replied. "One of us became

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a writer. The other one became a spy. While we were in school, we both knew a woman named Mamery St. Cloud, who studied nanotechnology."

"What?"

"The early version of grist. She had an accident with that primitive grist. It drove her insane. But in a very clever way. If she couldn't have Clare, she was going to kill him. She told Clare that herself, but nobody believed him when he tried to get help for her. Nobody except Jack Cureoak."

"Interesting version of the truth," Cureoak said. "Which doesn't change anything. None of this does. I still can't give you the key. Maybe I've even forgotten it."

"You haven't forgotten it. You made up the recall phrase yourself."

Cureoak snorted. "I've forgotten a lot of what I write," he said. "It's an occupational hazard after three hundred years."

"You don't understand, Jack. The new guy in charge, he's . . . not kind."

"That bastard Amés?"

"Yes, him. He's going to torture you. There is a copy of you being held in a data space on Mercury. You are to be looped for your crimes. Do you understand what this means, to be looped? Do you remember that your first self, the self that spawned you, drank himself to death? Over seven years, you drank and drank, until your gut hemorrhaged and you bled to death out your ass." C leaned over, touched Cureoak's old, papery hand. "Amés is going to throw you in accelerated virtual and give you whiskey, and make you die over and over again. Like you did before, bleeding from a busted gut and a broken heart."

Clan I Recur

The subway was long since automated, and now no one used it very much. The trains moved at the subconscious whim of the shadowy intelligences who controlled the switching system. But perhaps it had always been that way. When C rose from the underworld the next day, he found himself in Washington Square. It was just after dawn, and dew was on the grass in the park.

He sat down on a bench and remembered what he could.

So much dissipation. Strained through a hundred bodies, a thousand incarnations. Virtual, meat and blood, grist. What the hell did C stand for? What was his name? It couldn't possibly matter, or he would remember it. Wouldn't he?

A piece of string that crawls from a throat, and crawls into another mouth to be swallowed.

I was once a man. My real name is Clare Runic.

Real.

Name.

Hell, I was once a woman, too. Many men. Many women. Many other things made from data and grist. Things with blunted genders and sickles for brains. Small spaces. Spies must travel light. No room for the past. Spies don't have real names.

The truth is, thought C, that it is unclear whether or not I was once Clare Runic, or whether I need to *think* that I was in order to complete this mission. Something is happening of which I am not fully aware.

Across Washington Square, in the early morning light, a man was walk-

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ing toward him. This man wore a coat shaped very like his own. But as the man drew closer, he saw that it was actually the *lining* of a coat like his. And then the man sat down next to him on the bench.

The other man was C. He had met himself.

"Did you come for the coat?" C asked himself.

The other C smiled, shook his head.

"Amés contacted you," the other C said. "I was listening in."

"I thought that it was impossible to eavesdrop on banded gluon quantum teleported messages."

"Did you *really* think that?"

"No," said C. "I guess not really."

"He used a great deal of energy to make that transmission. Probably caused a brown-out on Mercury. He won't be able to contact you mind-to-mind using a secure method for another day. You met with Cureoak?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you the information?"

"No."

"Good. All we need is half of an Earth day. The Harmony code can be released after noon today."

"Good, because if I don't deliver it by midnight tonight, Amés is going to," C tapped his temple with a finger, "*check back in with me*, in his pretty little way."

"That will not present a problem."

"Good." The rising sun whitened the top of a nearby building, and both Cs watched the glow. After a moment, they both sighed simultaneously and got back to business.

"Why do you need a half day?" C said.

"For an escape," said the other C.

"Is it an important escape?"

"Even with the Harmony code dominating all the other LAPs and Artificial Intelligences, Amés can't take the outer system if this person escapes."

"Who is going to escape?"

The other C smiled. "I could tell you that," he said, "but then I'd have to shoot you. Let's just say that it is a Large Array of Personalities that Amés *must* control if he wants to rule all that he surveys."

"He *does* wish to rule all that he surveys," C said, rubbing his head, remembering the pain of Amés's voice inside his skull. "I can definitely vouch for that."

"We know this. There's no doubt."

C glanced sidelong at the other C.

"Are you going to tell me what's in the box?"

"The box is another matter entirely. It's part of a larger operation, as far as I can tell. I don't know what's in the box." The other C pulled a gun from the inner pocket of the liner. Did the liner have pockets before? He couldn't remember. The gun was an old-fashioned revolver. "When you obtain and use the Cassady-13 information, shoot the box with this."

"Shoot the *box*?"

"That's right."

"And I'm to have no knowledge of what shooting it will do?"

The other C shook his head. "One shot will be enough, though I've put three bullets in the chambers."

"We like built-in redundancy, don't we?"

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The other C let a thin wisp of a smile play over his features. His sea-green eyes seemed dimmed, as if a cloud had passed over the oceans inside them.

"Not exactly." He stood up, took off the coat liner and laid it on the bench beside C. "I'm ready," he said.

"Why didn't I know about this?" C asked himself.

"Because Amés would have found out if you'd left Mercury with the knowledge. He filtered you pretty fine to make sure you weren't up to one of your spy tricks. You know how he hates those dirty spy tricks."

"And how he depends upon them," C replied. He looked at the gun. "Is this really necessary?"

"Entirely," said the other C. He stepped away several paces.

Without another word, C took aim with the gun and pulled the trigger. As usual, he made a good head shot. The other C crumpled to the ground in a pool of brains and blood. There was no grist yet created that could put this mess back together again. But just to make sure, C had his own grist outriders obliterate all traces of his former self. Soon the remains of the other C were just a lump in the grass.

C shrugged out of his coat and put the liner back into it, then put the coat back on. He had been comfortable without the liner before, but the day had just grown a little colder.

Lucre in Ace

Later in the morning, C rang the buzzer on Cureoak's door in Chelsea. Hecate Minim leaned out a window and saw that it was him. C counted to see that she was on the sixth floor.

"What do you want?" she called down to him. "And how did you find us?"

"Through your grist," he replied. "Let me come up."

"Why should I do that?"

C stood for a moment and could think of nothing to say. Finally, he answered, "For old time's sake."

Hecate Minim ducked back inside. Nothing happened for a time, and then the door clicked open, as if a hand on the other side had unlocked it, then stepped away. He went inside, pushed the door shut behind him, and climbed the stairs to the sixth floor. There may have been an elevator, but he couldn't find it.

Cureoak was sitting in a recliner by the window. He smoked a Terra Nova, the pack—and an old-fashioned plastic ashtray—beside him on a small table. The smoke from the Terra Nova turned in the sunlight and assumed the form of dragons and fairies before dissipating into the gloom of the ceiling. It was a special grist additive that did this, and was what made them expensive cigarettes.

C sat down in a rocker across from him. Hecate Minim brought them both coffee. It was hot and the milk was fresh—the first good coffee he'd had since his return to Earth. She did not sit with them, but at the dining room table nearby, where she fingered receipts displayed across its surface within the grist, comparing profits to loss. A Mandala 90 dangled from her lips. She ashed it onto the table, which absorbed it and incorporated the ashes into its display.

"I have to release the children," C said to Cureoak.

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Cureoak took a drag, looked out the window at the day.

"Why *now*?" he said. "Why not three hundred years ago?"

C sipped his coffee.

"There is no other copy of you," C said. "I lied. I had to buy time. It is all rather complicated." He rocked once. Twice. "Amés has a copy of *me*. He had me duped before I left Mercury."

For the first time, Cureoak looked at him. "I'm sorry, Clare," he said.

"If I don't use Cassady-13, he's going to loop my copy in virtual."

C was trembling at the thought. Coffee sloshed over his cup and onto his wrist, so he set the cup down and held it in his lap with both hands. He stopped rocking.

"What did you do that makes you so afraid?"

"Something I didn't do."

"What?"

"Save the children when the city turned to bone."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cureoak said, and ran his hand through his thin hair. He rubbed his face and took another toke from his cigarette. "But you froze the Harmony code. You set back that old bastard's plans by three hundred years."

"Long enough," C said. "to give the rest of us a chance against him."

"You sure about that?"

"No, I'm not sure about anything. But I have information that leads me to believe that it's long enough. There have been some advances. People have got a chance against him now."

"And you expect me to trust you?" Cureoak leaned forward. "You told me never to trust anybody."

"I locked the bone-change down with a code key. I attached the code key to a cipher, and gave the text of that cipher to the only man I knew I could absolutely trust, whose loyalty I could be sure of."

"I'll never understand why you gave it to me and not to the old drunkard," Cureoak said.

"Have you ever considered," said C, "that the very fact that *you* possessed the key was the reason you didn't kill yourself with drink just like him?"

Cureoak leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his thighs and belly. *He likes to feel his reality in the world,* C thought. *He reminds himself of it every day.*

"Yes, yes," Cureoak said. "Of course, that's true. That and the love of his daughter. My daughter."

Hecate Minim looked up from what she was doing at the table. "Papa?" she said. "Is this true? All the nonsense about this Cassady-13?"

"Yes."

Hecate turned to C. "What will happen to him if he gives the key to you?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Director Amés won't have him killed out of vindictiveness?"

"No. He gave me his word he would not."

"What does that mean, coming from a tyrant?"

"Amés considers his word sacred. He is styling himself as an emperor, not a dictator. Honor is everything with him."

"And you would stake my father's life on this?"

"I'm staking my life on it. My other life, back on Mercury, where the copy is stored."

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"And what will happen to everybody *else?*" Cureoak said. He took a long drag and finished off his cigarette. When he breathed out, a great dragon with fiery eyes formed in front of Cureoak's face. For an instant, C thought it might stay there, come to life, and rip them all to pieces. But then it dissipated and was only smoke.

"I'm not certain," C said.

They were silent for a moment. C gazed at the walls of Cureoak's living room. They had once been white, but were now browned to a darker shade by years of cigarette smoke. Centuries, perhaps. There were fine cracks everywhere, and C had the distinct sense that the entire building was held together by nothing but paint.

Along one wall, tucked under a crown molding that was separating from it, was a line of dried red roses, hung upside down. Perhaps it was a ritual between Hecate and her father to exchange them. Perhaps only one of them brought them for the other. There were various possible permutations. He counted twenty-three roses.

"I believe," said C, "that Amés contains the seed to his own destruction within himself."

"So you transformed New York and killed a million people," said Hecate Minim. "But now you think it was a big mistake and things would have worked out all right in any case?"

"Most people got away."

"But not the children at school that day. Their parents couldn't get to them in time."

"The children aren't dead."

"What do you mean? Of course they are. Dead children are practically the religion of this city. And the business, too." Hecate Minim seemed suddenly close to tears. But she was not looking at C. She was looking at her own hands, as if they were dirty. As if she were as bad as he was.

"The children are . . . archived," C said gently. "In the grist."

"What are you saying? If you undo the bone-change then the children will all come back to life?"

"Yes. That is what I think will happen."

"Most of their parents are long dead, or else changed into something else."

"They will be orphans," said Cureoak. "Thousands of orphans."

Silence in the apartment for a moment. The air thick in the room. Smoke and dust and years.

"Remember how New York used to be?" said C.

"Chaos city," Cureoak said. "All things counter, original, spare and strange."

"I never thought I'd say it," C replied. "But I miss that."

Cureoak held the smoking cigarette butt in his left hand, looked at the forms assumed by the last of the smoke.

"And the hippos were boiled in their tanks," he said in a low, clear voice. His nonsense words blew the smoke away.

Cureoak blinked. Blinked again.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Yes. It's still there, all right. God damn, that is complicated and crazy! I could never have remembered it without the grist."

Jack Cureoak stood up from the chair by the window and came over to touch C's shoulder. Pellicle met pellicle. Grist met grist. He leaned over and kissed his old friend's cheek.

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"Set the children free," he whispered into C's ear.
C's mind bloomed with the Cassady-13 code key.

In Cruel Arc

They went to Columbia University, where it all began, to start changing the city back from the bone. The ivory gates shown like bloody teeth in the afternoon sun. The school grounds were empty. Nobody lived this far north in Manhattan, even though the subway still came here, responding to its secret subterranean predilections.

C set down his brown paper package on the ground beside him. He programmed the grist on the palms of his hands with the key.

Making the change would be the work of but a moment.

"Remember when you and I and Mamery used to have those long talks about what the world would be like after the grist was truly distributed everywhere?" said C, holding his coded hands in the air. "Now grist is all we are."

Cureoak leaned against the gate and shook another Terra Nova until it lit. "We are dark and sweet and lustrous," he said. "We are coffee made with rain." It was the first lines of a poem from *Desolate Traveler*. A benediction, C thought.

C knelt and touched his hands to Broadway.

"Good bye, Mamery," he whispered.

Instantly, the city began to change back from the bone.

Instantly, the Harmony code came away, swarmed about, seeking control.

But control of what? There wasn't anybody worth ruling on Earth any more.

It uplinked to the Met, assessed all of three hundred years in a microsecond. And like a great reverse tornado, swirled through the grist of Earth's surface, to the enormous cable coming in at the North Pole, and migrated into space, into the Met. Back across space, carrying its new freedom, the ability to shut down the bone-change, as a vanguard. Back to its creator and the absolute security of the fortress Amés had made of the planet Mercury. Within minutes, Amés had what he wanted to rule his world.

Far, far away, in the asteroid belt, a strange man was riding a spaceship that looked like a cloud to a moon of Neptune, and out of Amés's clutches. That man would be Amés's downfall. That was the plan. Or part of it. There would be a bloody war to fight. And other changes, more complex, more subtle.

One of the several copies of C—the oldest existing copy—knew all about this and understood what it meant. Was it all an elaborate plot to save humanity? Or had she really done it because of the children? She was standing there beside C when he changed the city back. She was standing next to C and the man who thought she was his daughter, and though she knew all that had been set into motion, she still did not understand the turnings of her own heart. Was it punishment or redemption she sought?

All I know is that these men are my brothers, still and always, Hecate Minim thought. That is the one thing that has survived all the transformations, all the dark deeds, and all the changes—all the ways that time can spell a human being. I am my brother's keeper. It is what there is to do while you are alive.

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Lunar Circe

In old New York, the sun set and the children opened their eyes to twilight. It could have been later in the same day that they went to school. But it wasn't. It was much later than that.

Clue in Carr

While the city changed back into itself, the three of them walked down to the Hudson River at 116th Street, down to the park grounds where Cureoak had stabbed Mamery to death three hundred years before. Weeds had grown up since then.

"I still remember," Cureoak said. "But it fades. It *does* fade."

"She would have wanted to die if she had known what she had become," C said. "I always believed that."

"I wish that I could know that for certain."

"*I* wish that I could have brought *myself* to do it," said C. "I've done it so much since then. When I felt that it was called for."

"Yes, yes." Cureoak rubbed his face and his stomach. He leaned on his cane. "Not the same, though," he said. "Mamery was the woman you loved. I couldn't stand watching the way you were dying with her. It was the only way to keep both of you from dying."

"Everything would have been different if I had killed her instead of you killing her."

"Do you think so, really?" said Cureoak. "That I would have turned into the spy and you would be the poet?"

"That the other you might not have died of drink," said C. "And I would have liked to have been a poet."

"I'm alive," said Cureoak. "And you might be a poet, yet."

C smiled, shook his head. "I have one more thing to do, and then I have to go."

"Yes, yes, yes," Cureoak said, laughing. And then he stopped laughing suddenly. He rubbed his eyes. They had begun to tear up.

"Oh," he said. "I see."

"Don't worry," said C. "There's more where I came from."

Lucien Carr

He asked Cureoak to leave him there and to go home. In the end they compromised, and Hecate Minim remained while Cureoak waited for her at the gates of the University. The two men parted with no words.

Cureoak stood looking at C for a long while. He finally touched C's shoulder. All there was to say was in the grist. After a moment of contact, he took away his hand and walked from the river, up the hill and into the city.

C sat down with his back against a sweetgum. Red, pointed leaves covered the ground about him. The brown box was next to his knees, upon the strange unearthly Earthly shapes of the sweetgum balls. Hecate Minim stood away a few paces. The twilight air was still and chilly, like a gel.

C reached into his coat for a cigarette, but he hadn't had any for a long,

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long time. Hecate Minim saw what he was doing and gave him one of hers. He lit it up with a single, quick flick.

"I used to smoke," he said. "But I never smoke when I'm on the job. Cigarette butts are a classic tell-tale."

C took a long drag. Breathed out and was surrounded by fog.

"So," he said to Hecate Minim. "Are you going to tell me what's in the box?"

She was startled for a moment. Then she smiled, and her green eyes danced. She sat down beside him and lit a smoke for herself.

"What if the flow of time is not a line?" Hecate Minim said. "What if it's not like a line at all?"

"What is it like, then?" said C. He was enjoying this cigarette. It had been so long, and he had once liked them so much.

"Time is like a name," said Hecate Minim.

"A name?"

"You can't change the letters, but you can switch them around to make *another* name. Like an anagram."

C looked at his hands. They were trembling slightly, but the cigarette was having an effect and he felt calm. Very calm. "Are you talking about the box?" he said.

"Am I?"

"All right. For the sake of argument. Some of the new names might make more sense than others," he said. "Some of them might hurt fewer people by the very way they were spelled out."

Hecate nodded. "What if we—you and I—discovered how to rearrange that anagram? What if we change history around just a little? Just enough—so that three people have a chance to win the coming war?" She finished her cigarette and turned to look at the river. "You have a quantum transceiver implant, with a direct line to Amés. I can't risk telling you more."

"I understand. But soon it won't matter."

"I won't forget you," she said. "I contain all the anagrams; I'm the one who never forgets."

I will, C thought.

Is that what it is?

For a moment, C had a strange sense that all of this had happened before. And not just to him. Not just in these circumstances. That there was a crucial bit of information that it was necessary to forget, and that, instead of progressing and increasing human knowledge, the *forgetting* was what living was actually for. That forgetting was what all of us were doing and we didn't know it, because we couldn't know it for the forgetting to really work.

Except, maybe at the end, it all became clear. Was this the moment? This moment between the hammer and the strike, between the lines of the poem, when the hidden writing came to the surface and the true secret mission was revealed?

"Are you okay?" Hecate Minim said. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine," C replied. "There's no such thing as a ghost. Give me another cigarette, please."

She knocked one out of her pack, lit it herself, and handed it to him. She lit another for herself.

C smoked his halfway down before speaking again. "Take care of your father," he said. "Times are about to get rough."

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"I will."

"He was the best friend I ever had."

"I know," she said.

"What are you and he going to do with all those orphans?"

Hecate sighed. "Keep them, I guess."

C looked at her carefully. Were those tears he saw? No, couldn't be. It had been centuries since a woman had gotten all misty over him. Must be the smoke getting in her eyes.

And what an odd idea about the meaning of life, he thought. Forgetting? That couldn't be it. It was completely crazy to think like that. Better to get on with things and forget about it. Best forget all about it and get on with what he had to do.

What if that *is what's in the box? The thing that we—all of us—are constantly forgetting?*

I don't need to know in order to carry out the plan, C thought. That's really all there is to it, after all.

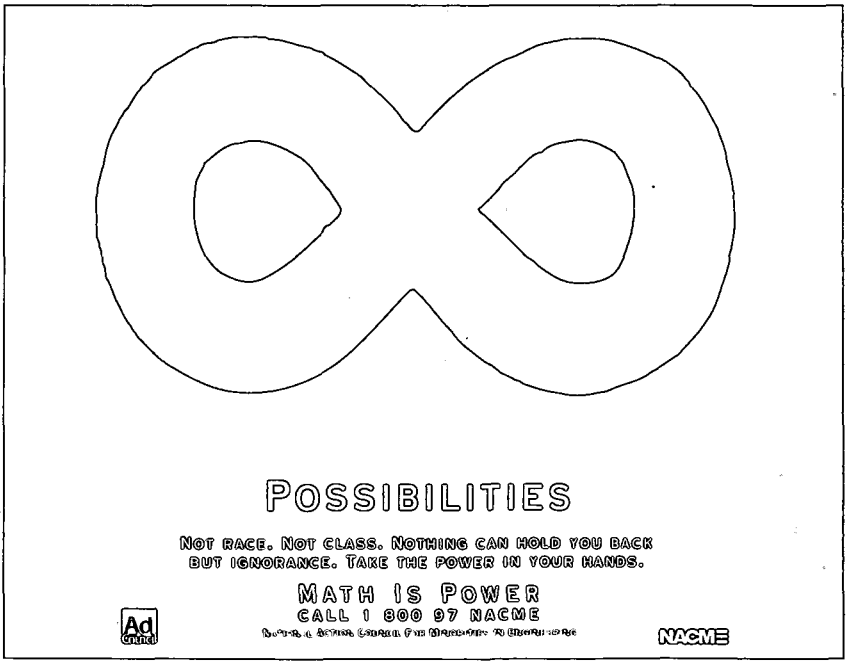
He and Hecate sat together in the park and smoked down their cigarettes, then ground them out against a root of the sweetgum tree. She stood up and stepped away. He did not.

C gazed up at Hecate Minim and winked.

"Here's looking at you," he said. "Whoever you are."

He took out the revolver and fired it into the box. He then put the muzzle of the gun into his own mouth, though he didn't clamp his lips about it because the barrel was still hot. Without another thought, he pulled the trigger.

As usual, C hit what he was aiming for. ❍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ATLANTIS

Noise gushes forth from the city,
Turbulent, heavy its musical theme;
Sometimes the thunderous ditty
Splashes a sound like a scream.
Here it is quiet,
Here the still water
Lies in the hush of a dream.

Still and deserted and sunlit,
Here, far away from the shores of the Real,
Over the strand and the inlet,
Dreamland is weaving its spell.
Lean on my shoulder,
Look past the border
Fixed by the line of the rail.

Things on the bottom that shimmer—
Those are not riffles and rocks, my dear.
See how the palaces glimmer?
See the bright castles down there?
Sunken Atlantis,
Mythic Atlantis,
World that was drowned—it's here!

Glistening castle of marble,
Pearly façade, that gleams and glares,
Statue of saint and of noble,
Avenues, gardens, and squares!
Now there is silence,
Now through the city
Memory drifts and despairs.

Those of the privileged classes
Gained by their millions the power to oppress,
Stole from the suffering masses,
Reaped their refinement's success.
And while they feasted

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Drank and were merry,
Want grew as well, and apace.

Thus was Atlantis the mighty
Damned by the High Ones to sink and be lost.
Opulent men of the city
Lie in the splendor they cursed—
Wondrously gifted,
Sunken, corrupted,
Brought to their ruin at last!

Over that city in slumber,
Garnished with coral, the gift of the sea,
Sun in solution falls somber,
Feeble as starlight should be.
Nets of green algae
Twist around columns
Soundlessly, effortlessly.

One day, and soon, for us also
Doom may be coming, the hour of our end.
One day, and soon, on us also
Slumber and night could descend,
Waves will be rocking
Light will be shining
Faint through the waves and the wind.

Dear one, the city now gushing
Thunder and tumult is built upon mud.
One day the sea will come rushing
Over the land in a flood.
Over our deathdreams
Soon may be swinging
Folk of an alien blood.

—Gustaf Fröding (1860-1911)
(Translated from the Swedish
by Judith Moffett)

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Kristine Kathryn Rusch

BONDING

Late last year, Bantam published Kristine Kathryn Rusch's last book of the Fey series, *Victory*, and they will be bringing out, *Black Queen*, the first book in her new Black Throne Series shortly. Ms. Rusch has recently turned her hand to mysteries as well. As Kris Rusch, she wrote an historical crime novel, *Hitler's Angel* that was published by St. Martin's last June and a number of her short stories have been appearing in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

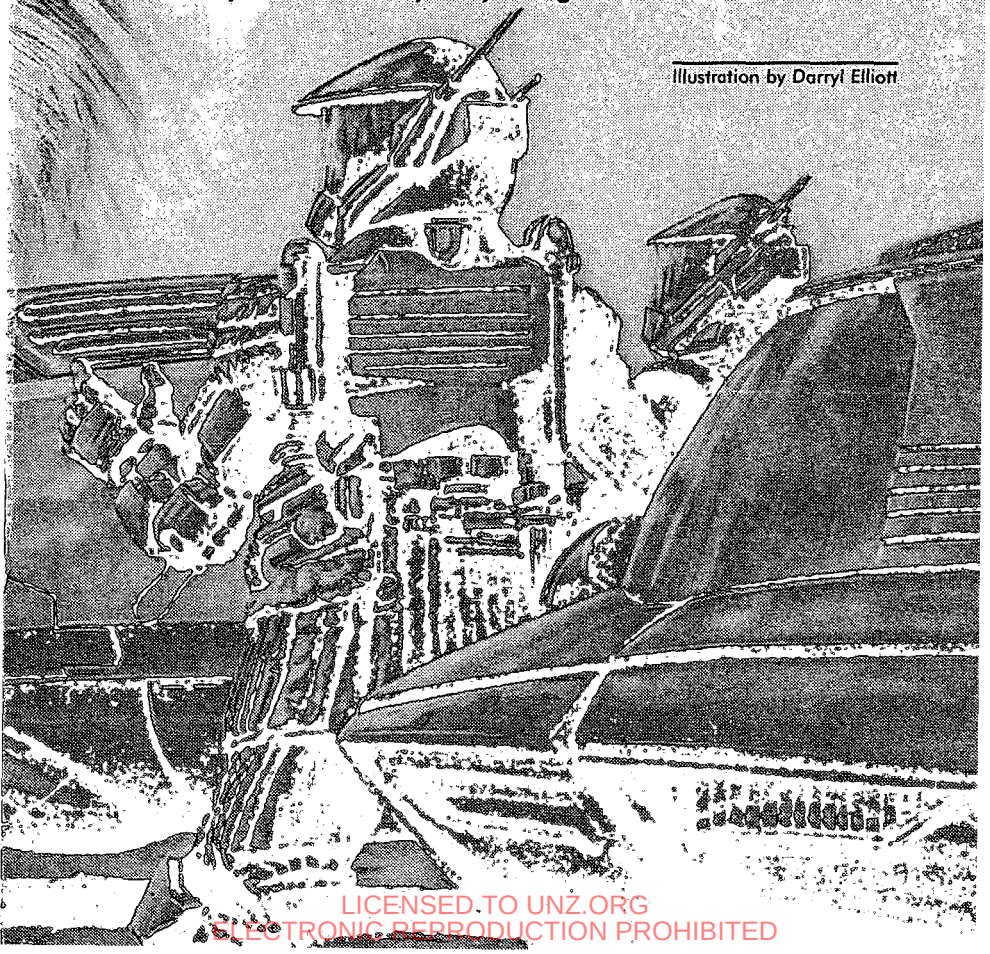

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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This part of K'Dar'Ak smelled like wet wool. I pulled my parka hood around my face, thankful for the chill. Heat always accentuated odors. I glanced over my shoulder. My companion, George, was studying a snow mural as if he had never seen anything like it before. I couldn't see the back-up team, but I knew they were there. This was a part of my job that I both welcomed and feared. Done right, we'd break another ring. Done wrong—well. Done wrong, no one really cared.

No one but us.

George stuck his mittened hands in his pockets and the thermal lining sealed around them. He nodded toward me, his breath visible in the thin air. K'Dar'Ak's atmosphere was barely tolerable for humans, but that didn't stop us from settling the place. Anytime there was money to be made, humans would gather. These beautiful towns, carved out of snow and k'dar, a hard grainy wood-like substance, would disappear if the funds ran out.

I took a deep breath, feeling the chill in my lungs. It felt as if I could never get enough air, even though all the studies said I could. I just hadn't acclimatized. I had arrived on K'Dar'Ak only last night; George had figured my breathless state and my chill-crystalled skin would mark me as a newcomer, and make me less suspicious.

I hoped so. I hated working at a disadvantage.

George had also figured that my small frame, my high-pitched voice, and my wide eyes would have a similar effect. Most people saw me as younger than I was. That, combined with my girlish presence, made them dismiss me, just as they would dismiss a young boy who came into their midst.

I rounded the corner, out of sight of George and the back-up squad. This was so that my contact wouldn't get nervous. I had three different security implants, tiny chips—each more undetectable than the last—and I activated all of them before continuing.

The wet wool smell increased. Someone had once told me it was caused by a combination of the building materials and the snow. K'Dar'Ak looked like no place I'd ever seen before. The homes were small and round—igloo-shaped, some Earth historian once told me—but the k'dar formed the frame. A thin porous material also native to K'Dar'Ak stretched over that frame, and then the locals let snow gather all winter, spending much of their leisure time creating murals on the exterior walls. I'd watched one local work that morning, using tools I'd never seen, creating lines in the snow, using one tool to melt the edges around the line, and then another to freeze the line solid. A few humans used snow paints to decorate their murals, but those weren't as pure as the native murals. Each native mural looked different, even though the colors used were white, light gray, and white again.

George told me that a lot of humans hired locals to create their murals. I didn't doubt it. The process looked laborious and it seemed strange to me, to work on a piece of art all winter only to have it melt in one day in the Sudden Spring Thaw.

Yet all of the houses I passed had murals on their western walls. It wasn't custom to have them on the east. A lot of the homes glowed from within, meaning someone was home. Flagsticks with metal tags stuck out of the snow near the front doors, giving the house numbers.

I went to Number 84A, just as I was instructed.

The door was three steep steps down and in an enclave built from k'dar and shell. I stood on the threshold and knocked, even though I knew it wasn't local custom. I was supposed to be from the Moon, Armstrong to be exact,

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and customs there came from the Western Alliance on Earth. It was best to keep up the pretense in all ways.

The door opened. A small man with a wispy brown beard stared at me. His eyes were extended slightly, as happened to humans born on K'Dar'Ak, and his skin showed evidence of a dozen broken capillaries. His features marked his age at less than twenty; K'Dar'Ak's human habitation began only twenty-one years ago.

"g'dit?" he asked in Kiddy, which was what outsiders called the local variation of one of the native tongues. He had asked me what I wanted. I pretended not to understand.

"Do you speak English?" I asked, making my voice even breathier than usual. "Or maybe Cantonese?"

"English," he said. The word was heavily accented: it sounded more as if he had said *Ang Leash.*

"Excellent," I said. "I'm Marisa Creelman. We've been exchanging e-mail."

When he didn't respond, I made my lower lip tremble.

"From Armstrong? On the Moon? Isn't this the—"

"Yes," he said and ushered me inside.

There the air was so hot as to be almost oppressive. It smelled of wood smoke and garlic. The locals here used a fire pit to cook a lot of their meals. It had the extra advantage of warming the homes. K'dar was easy to grow, and added a flavor to the food that had become a delicacy on Mars, the Moon, and Earth. The locals had standard cooking devices, of course, but anyone who'd spent a lot of time on K'Dar'Ak prided himself on his ability to cook in a firepit.

The light inside was diffuse and thick with particles. It took my eyes a moment to adjust. The living area was divided into an entertainment grouping, a dining room, and a kitchen. Through a curved doorway were more rooms. I assumed they were the sleep area.

In the center of the entertainment area, three infant Ce'narks rolled over each other. They were round and still had their white fur. They looked healthy enough, although I wouldn't be able to tell until I got them to our unit.

The man followed my gaze. "Lucky you came today," he said. "Two spoken for."

I felt a shiver run through me. I hoped the back-up team had heard that. If we did this right, we would get not only the distributors, but some of the buyers as well.

"Have they chosen their creatures?" I asked, keeping my voice girlish and eager.

He shook his head. "Too risky. Must always be done in person. Sometimes people change their minds."

He was looking at me as he said that last, as if he sensed something, my sadness perhaps. I'd always had trouble hiding it on cases like this. "The Ce'nark is for my brother," I said, to cover the emotion. "I told you he was ill, didn't I?"

The man frowned. "Better he be here, then. Ce'narks only bond a few times."

"But these are babies," I said. "Surely they're unbonded."

He shrugged. "Found them. Do not know what happened to their unit. Perhaps bonded and died. Perhaps."

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"These are litter mates?"

"No," he said, then his frown grew deeper. "Do not know. Found together."

"Oh, so they must be." Probably not. Probably they were captured, their parents killed. That was the normal way of these things. The sadness filled me again.

Where was the back-up team?

"You should see closer."

I didn't want to, but I could tell he was getting suspicious. I had to stall somehow. I glanced at them. The Ce'narks were the size of basset hounds. They would grow double that size, get fangs, and lose some of the roly-poly cuteness that made them so popular among humans. But that would happen gradually. Ce'narks had a life span of fifty plus years, and didn't lose their baby cuteness until they were nearly ten. Then they were abandoned, and often died, because the bonding was broken.

"You said you found them. Does that mean they don't have paperwork?"

"Told you in e-mail these were not official."

"But how am I supposed to get them to Armstrong?"

He measured me for a moment. "You have coin?"

Coin. I hadn't heard that term in years. "Credit," I said. "Earth funds, mostly European Union currency, although I can get it transferred into Galaxy Exchange."

"Good enough." He was watching me. "If you have coin, you can get papers."

"But they won't be official."

"You want official, buy from authorized store."

And, we both knew, the authorized pet stores did not sell infant Ce'narks. "My brother really wants this."

"Then you use coin."

"Credit," I said.

"Credit," he said, nodding.

"You can set me up with the papers?"

"Yes," he said.

"And they'll be official enough to get the Ce'nark from here to the Moon?"

"Yes," he said. "Done it before."

That was enough. That was more than enough. Where was the back-up?

"You want to see now?"

I couldn't think of an excuse to stay away. I didn't glance at the door—I was too much of a pro for that—but I was counting the seconds. A vibration tingled through my skin. The signal. They were delayed.

He crossed his arms. "You don't want Ce'nark, do you? Why you here?"

I swallowed. I was on my own for a few more minutes. "I—I don't want to bond to my brother's pet."

He tilted his head. "You have no choice. It bonds on the way to Moon."

"Then it's not worth the sale to me. It needs to bond to my brother."

"They bond more than once. Three, sometimes four."

"But you said you didn't know how often—"

"These are babies. They not bond much yet."

Still nothing. The vibration continued, soft and subtle. Something in that worried me.

"Come." He took my arm and led me to the Ce'narks. I couldn't even activate my own emergency warning. Damn. I would have to play along with this.

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I walked toward the babies. They smelled faintly of cinnamon and fresh bread—another early selling point to humans. Later, when the Ce'nark went through puberty, the scents would solidify into something closer to spoiled milk, something only the toughest human nose could handle.

"Aren't they cute?" I said, mostly because it was expected of me, and dropped on my knees outside the cage.

The Ce'narks all looked at me, their round orange eyes liquid and somehow lonely. They had brown snouts and small thin lips over rounded teeth. Ce'narks were usually fed by their parents for the first five years. They didn't get their real teeth until they were seven.

"What do I feed it?" I asked.

"Which one?" he said.

"Hmm?"

"Which one you want? Then we talk food."

The vibration had stopped. The back-up was coming. League rules didn't allow me to make an arrest until they arrived. In fact, I wouldn't be making the arrest at all. It kept my face off the vids, nets, and links, kept my undercover intact.

"That one," I said, pointing to the thin one in the back. It did appeal to me. Its face was rounder, its eyes wider. It had been staring at me since I arrived.

"Good," he said, and reached into the cage. Before I realized what he was doing, he picked up the Ce'nark and placed it in my arms.

I swore under my breath. The Ce'nark was warm and its skin soft. Its fur was even soft, with that silky thin texture that long-haired human newborns had. It snuggled against me, rooting in the way of mammals, looking for a nipple, looking for food. Its bones stood out in sharp relief to its skin, and the nails on its toes were flaking. It was malnourished.

"What do I feed it?" I asked again.

At that moment, the door burst open. The back-up team was in. Five men and two women. George was behind them, looking at me with great disapproval.

The leader of the back-up team and another team member took my contact outside to make the live net record of his arrest. Three of the men and one of the women searched the rest of the dwelling for accomplices and information. The remaining woman placed the other two Ce'narks in specially constructed cages. I crouched, trying to hand her mine, when she shook her head.

"It's yours now," she said.

"Mine? But I can't—"

"You have to," she said, her tone flat. "It's already bonded."

Ce'narks ate pulped branches of local bushes called mikiles mixed with snow and some leaves for flavor. Unfortunately, the mother Ce'nark was the one who pulped the branch, and it wasn't until infant Ce'narks started to die in large numbers that our scientists realized the mother's saliva was an essential part of the infant's nutrition. A formula was developed that imitated the saliva's benefits, as best as humanly possible of course. There were several side-effects, most considered fortunate by human authorities. The severest was that any Ce'nark infant raised on the formula would grow up sterile.

Luckily our team had been planning to pick up live Ce'nark infants, and

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had a small compound prepared. The two unbonded infants were placed in a wide cage filled with snow and several warm beds to mimic their homes in the wild. The bonded infant remained with me.

Lenie Davis, the woman in charge of the Reclamation Unit, had given me a Ce'nark tank, and instructed me to sit in it. The tank had a self-contained snow-filled area, and a warm sleepers' area. It covered half my tiny living quarters, barely leaving me enough room for the bed.

I sat inside the tank, cradling the Ce'nark, and tried to feed it the formulaic paste that Lenie had given me. The Ce'nark sniffed the paste, and then would reach toward my mouth as if to take it from my lips. The creature wouldn't eat from my hands.

"You'll have to feed it properly." Lenie's clipped British vowels gave her voice an air of command that no one else in the unit had.

"Properly?" I asked, knowing somehow what she meant.

"It wants to eat the way it was taught. It'll die if it doesn't." She came around the tank so that I could see her. She was wearing a gray single piece made of soft fur, the uniform of the Reclamation team. It mimicked, as best as humanly possible, the skin of an adult Ce'nark.

"Why don't you do it?" I asked.

"Because it's bonded to you."

I gazed at the little creature. It touched my mouth again, and mewled. I sighed.

I was thirty-five years old, unmarried, and childless. On purpose. I had joined the undercover squad when I was fifteen so that I wouldn't have any ties. I didn't need any ties. I had seen, in the Colony Riots on the Moon, what happened to people who were tied to others. My entire family died in those Riots. It was an experience I didn't need to have again.

"Can't it bond to someone else?"

"Maybe," Lenie leaned over the edge of the tank. "But do you really want to risk its life on that?"

I stared at her. We had had this discussion twice, and apparently she was ready to have it the third time. We had no idea how this Ce'nark was taken from its family. That bond remained. That bond would always remain. But if it had bonded to its kidnappers or to anyone else along the way, we couldn't tell. And Ce'narks only bonded a few times. Those bonds were life. A Ce'nark didn't eat without someone bonded near it, or drink, or sleep. Unbonded Ce'narks died within days.

Lenie hypothesized that the unbonded pair we had in the other tank had, in reality, bonded to each other. That would create a problem later, if their families were found. It might solve a problem if their families were not.

"Rather frightening to know you hold someone's life in your hands, isn't it?" she asked.

"It happens to me a lot," I said, and I wasn't bragging. That Ce'nark trafficker owed his life to me. I could have killed him after he confessed and not gotten in trouble. There was precedent for that.

"Yes," Lenie said. "I suppose it does. You choose to kill or not to kill. But I'll wager you've never been forced to nurture before. That's as important to life as your usual choice."

I knew that. I knew it and had always avoided it. I was not a nurturer. "Maybe I could watch while you—?"

The Ce'nark put its fur-covered fingers in my mouth, stood on its hind feet and peered inside. It mewled again.

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"No," Lenie said. "You have to."

I grimaced, looking at the pink paste that coated my right hand. "This stuff won't hurt me, will it?"

Lenie laughed. "No."

I raised my hand, wincing as I did so, the smell of cinnamon, burnt plastic, and pond scum wafting toward me. The little creature drooled as it watched.

I scraped the paste off my hand with my teeth, then leaned forward, careful to keep my tongue away from the stuff. Not that it mattered much. The paste tasted like it smelled, and it had the consistency of overcooked oatmeal.

The Ce'nark cooed and fished a handful out of my mouth with its little fingers. Its tiny nails dug into my gums.

"Ouch!" I said, pulling back.

The Ce'nark stopped and looked at me. I had to be going crazy. It looked concerned.

"I—um—it's all right," I said.

The creature chirruped, then mimicked my action, scraping the paste into its mouth with its teeth. It chewed happily for a moment, then rooted in my mouth for more.

This was the most disgusting procedure I had gone through in twenty years of undercover work on six planets. And that was saying something.

"You're getting the hang of it," Lenie said. "You'll be a bond-pair in no time."

"I think we already are," I said, then cursed as my tongue hit the remains of the paste. I was wrong. The stuff tasted worse than it smelled. Like someone had added one part vermouth and two parts fish oil to the cinnamon, burnt plastic, and pond scum.

The Ce'nark made a sound between a giggle and a chirrup—it seemed delighted by the look of disgust that I made—and then it scraped the last of the paste out of my mouth.

"How do I teach it to stay clear of the gums?" I asked.

"They don't have gums," she said. "Not like we do. It's not a natural motion. We don't want to teach it too much in the hopes it can return to the wild."

"In the meantime, I lose half the protective layer over my teeth."

"We have a salve for it."

The Ce'nark patted my face with its clean hand, then climbed off my lap and went to its warm sleeping nest.

"You'll have to follow it, and tuck it in," Lenie said.

"For heaven's sake—"

"It's a Ce'nark ritual. Why do you think early colonists took to the beasties?"

I glared at her, then followed the Ce'nark. The marvels of modern technology. The sleeping nest somehow mimicked the hot air pockets found throughout the snow-covered wilds of K'Dar'Ak. The Ce'nark only lived in the north, and in the summer had to sleep elsewhere. Nothing lived in the southern climes of this hemisphere. The entire ground there was steam muck and air so hot that it could burn the skin off an unprotected human in a matter of minutes.

I patted the Ce'nark three times, then smoothed its fur. It ran a pink-coated blue tongue over its lips, smacking them slightly, then cooing at me.

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After a moment, its eyes closed and it assumed the rigid, death-like posture the Ce'narks held in sleep.

"I'll never get used to that," I said.

"Vestigial hibernation," Lenie said. "One of those once-important traits that isn't necessary any more but remains encoded. Rather like our need to put on fat six months of every year."

I patted the Ce'nark once more for good measure, then stood. My knees cracked as I did so. "I do know something about Ce'narks," I said.

"Oh?" Lenie asked.

"I knew that last one."

She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You can get out of there now."

I did. Climbing out of the tank was harder than getting in. The plastic walls were higher on the inside than on the out. The flooring was recessed inside the tank.

I had to leverage myself over the edge. Lenie didn't give me any assistance.

"I'd offer you something to drink, but my entire kitchen and living area has been subsumed by this damn tank."

She nodded, and sat at the edge of my bed. I couldn't leave the Ce'nark. To do that would kill it also, if it hadn't bonded with anyone else. In their first three years of life, infant Ce'narks were never alone.

I hadn't known that when I walked toward that cage this afternoon. If I had, I wouldn't have gone near the little creature.

"I've been speaking to your supervisor," she said. "The arrest was a good one. You got the leader of one of the animal theft rings on K'Dar'Ak, as well as several of his accomplices and buyers. The folks upstairs think there'll be a lot more arrests before this is through. Good job."

I continued standing, leaning against the wall so that I could see her clearly, as well as the tank. I crossed my arms. "So why are you telling me this instead of George?"

She looked down at her hands, spread out before her as if she were examining her nails. "George sent me."

"Obviously. Why?"

"I reviewed the vid record of this arrest. You did everything by the book. You could have avoided touching the Ce'nark, but that would have meant that we would have lost the accomplices and probably the buyers. We would only have captured the supplier, and that's not enough, certainly, to justify the expense we went to."

"I know that," I said, keeping my voice deliberately dry.

She raised her head. "I'm trying to tell you not to blame yourself."

"For?"

"The choices you're now going to have to make."

I felt the muscles in my back tense. "Go on."

"These Ce'narks are young, and still quite close to their original bondings. If the suppliers didn't touch the families, the Ce'narks have a good chance of being returned to the wild."

"Excellent." I didn't want a Ce'nark around. It didn't suit my job.

"For now," she said, "you're being assigned to the Reclamation team."

"Nice try," I said, "but I stay with the undercover unit."

"It's not an offer," she said. "It's an order. You can log on later to verify."

A chill ran through me. Things didn't usually work this way. Usually a service requested me, and I could choose or deny the job.

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"Why?" I asked.

She nodded toward the tank. "It may take us a week to find its family unit. We may not find any of its family at all. If that's the case, the Ce'nark will die without its bonded caretaker."

She left the third option unsaid, the most likely option. That the Ce'nark's tribal unit had been slaughtered during the theft of the infant.

I was being manipulated into a place I vowed I would never go. "It's young. Why don't we see if it can bond to someone else before we leave the base? Then you can take it into the wild and I can go to my next assignment."

She shook her head. "It's too risky. If it fails to bond, we've wasted precious time. Judging from the infants' behavior and from the way that this one bonded to you, they'd only been in custody a day, maybe less."

"Nonsense," I said. "The supplier contacted me a week ago, promising me an infant Ce'nark."

"That's right."

"And he said he had one."

"That's right too. He was probably monitoring a tribe, and he knew that he could get the infants fresh before you arrived. That way they wouldn't seem too sickly for the buyer, and if they later died unbonded they would die due to the buyer's 'lack of care' rather than the supplier's carelessness."

"Ruthless son of a bitch," I muttered.

"Exactly," she said. "But what that means is that the tribe is probably still in the area. We can find them. But we're almost out of time."

"And I have to come with you."

"With your infant." She stood. "It's either that, or you get to keep it. Do it my way and you may get your old life back. Do it your way and you'll be assigned to desk duty until you die or the Ce'nark bonds to someone else."

I glanced at the small creature, asleep in a fetal position. It was cute, right, but that was all. Cute and vulnerable and worrisome. It had no place in my life.

"I don't want to do this."

"Think of it as part of your undercover assignment," she said. "I'll download the information you need, as well as the equipment you'll be required to bring along. And I'll make sure we have the materials for care of the Ce'nark."

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?"

"Why should I?" she asked. "If you keep that Ce'nark, we've undermined the point of that entire raid."

"We still would have arrested the supplier and his team."

"And kept a Ce'nark for a pet, something we've railed against for nearly a decade now. How hypocritical is that?" She glanced at me. "Not becoming attached, are you, Marisa?"

I snorted. "No."

"Good," she said. "Because it wouldn't make any difference if you were. The Ce'nark is going home."

She headed toward the door. "See you in the staging area at 0500 sharp."

And then she let herself out. 0500. That gave the Ce'nark some sleep and me almost none. I sat on the edge of my bed near the warm spot that Lenie had left.

I didn't want to go with a Reclamation team. I had managed to avoid that part of my training by volunteering from my first undercover assignment. I

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was as unprepared as a rookie, and I hadn't had that kind of disadvantage in years. I wouldn't be in charge of the unit; I'd be the junior member.

With a Ce'nark that ate seven meals a day.

I winced at the thought of that paste. Then I got up, grabbed my palmtop, and scanned the information that Lenie had downloaded for me.

When I showed up at the staging area, my tongue was numb from the taste of that paste. The Ce'nark was cooing and pointing, although I didn't know if the gesture meant anything or not. If it were a human child or a monkey, I would have known its interest in its surroundings by those gestures. But it was neither, and the more time I spent with the creature the clearer that became.

We had both been up an hour. I spent some of that time feeding the Ce'nark and the rest trying to catch it to get it out of the tank. If I had known that the little thing wanted to run after it ate, I would have fed it last, then carried it out of the tank. As it was, I arrived at the staging area exhausted and more than a little annoyed.

The Ce'nark wrapped all four of its limbs around me and hid its eyes against my shoulder as we stepped into the light.

The staging area was an unheated bunker, empty except for the team—six of us, counting me—and the lightweight white glider trucks especially built for work on K'Dar'Ak. We were given two trucks for this mission. One to remain at the point of entry as a back-up and guard, and the other to go in as far as the environmental laws allowed.

We didn't want to scare the Ce'nark, but we did want to find them.

I wore a white parka and snow pants. The parka had attached mittens that doubled as handwarmers and a self-sealing hood with a five hour oxygen supply. The pants had a boot feature that could, in a pinch, cover the feet with a thin layer of thermal material. It wasn't great protection, but it would do if something did happen to my regular boots.

We also had emergency rations stored flat in the pockets, enough to get us through two days of great conservation. The trucks carried most everything else, including our daily rations and heat tents, as well as a small tank for the unbonded Ce'narks. Lenie informed me that my Ce'nark would sleep with me "just like in the wild."

I had no rational response to that, so I said nothing. I got into the truck as assigned. The seats were long and unpadded. There were no windows. There was a small cold tank for the Ce'nark to use as it needed. We were only supposed to be traveling a short time, but there was no guarantee. If we found a trace of the tribe, we might be following it for most of the week.

Four of us rode in the back of this truck. Lenie and one other rode with the other two Ce'narks in the second truck. I sat nearest the tank. The Ce'nark kept its face hidden in my parka, clinging to me as if it thought I would leave in an instant. The truck rose, then clanged as the wheels folded beneath it, setting off on a smooth glide. The movement made the Ce'nark cling even harder, and I wondered if I would be bruised in the morning.

The others were trained Reclamation workers. Two women, Hildy and Betty, sat side by side, and spoke quietly in a language I didn't know. The only man in this group, Nathan, slept. No one talked to me. They all avoided looking at the Ce'nark.

The Ce'nark's breathing eased, and I realized that it too slept. Despite my

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own lack of sleep, I sat stiffly, not quite comfortable on the rough seats, going over the mission.

They had denied me a weapon, worried, I suppose, that I would accidentally kill Ce'narks. I knew better than that, but expected the treatment. I was the rookie after all, and I was the one bonded to a Ce'nark, justifiably or not. It was, according to the manual I had downloaded sometime during the night, so taboo among Reclamation officers that any who made such a mistake were banned from the corps for life.

Thank the higher powers that I was working enforcement undercover, not Reclamation. I would lose this badge as soon as I lost the creature.

My chances of that were pretty good. Reclamation had reintroduced 85 percent of recovered Ce'narks to the wild. Ce'nark family units had a definable DNA trace, as well as a distinct pheromone, easily measured. The Reclamation units used the pheromone to make sure the recovered Ce'narks were with the correct family; if the unit had any concerns at all, it would take a DNA sample, usually from hair in the nest, and confirm from there.

Recovered Ce'narks were usually tagged with green environmental bracelets for easy visual identification, and a subcutaneous chip so that the movements of the tribes could be monitored. The chip had the added benefit of letting the Reclamation folks know if any Ce'nark found dead was one accidentally placed with the wrong family group. So far that had never happened.

I had one of the bracelets for my Ce'nark. It had already received its subcutaneous chip, in its initial examination after it was brought to the Reclamation site.

The Ce'nark's warm body seemed to grow even hotter in sleep. Its even breathing inspired my own; its primary heart, pounding against mine, seemed to calm me as well. Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep. I didn't wake up until we reached the field site, nearly three standard hours later.

The field site was several kilometers past the village where I found the Ce'narks. We parked the trucks beneath some k'dar, their snow-covered branches providing great cover. We would have to go the rest of the way into the forest on foot.

The drivers remained with the trucks and were instructed to remain linked with us at all times. They were to monitor net-links, the open vid chips, and sound as well. At any sign of trouble they were either to send for help or to come in after us.

That part of the plan seemed fairly standard to me. Traveling in such a large group—seven humans, counting me, and three Ce'narks—seemed unusual. Lenie had brought a specially built glide sled for the unbonded Ce'narks, as well as glide shoes for us. We weren't to leave a trace of ourselves on the snow-covered landscape, except, of course, if we needed to camp. Even then, we had to follow special double-blind procedures.

As the group started its preparations, I fed my Ce'nark and winced as it nicked my gums again. At least I was getting used to the taste of that damn paste. When it was done, the Ce'nark patted my face with its clean hand, and tried to climb down so that it could run around.

I didn't let it go.

As I climbed out of the truck, extending one hand for balance and keeping the other beneath the Ce'nark so that I didn't drop it, I paused and watched

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the efficient movements of the team. It was clear I wasn't a part of the group; I was there only as the Ce'nark's bonded pair, an inconvenience, an embarrassment. I said nothing as I put on my glide shoes beneath my boots and tested the strength of the glide field before leaving the staging area.

The air here was even colder than it had been in the village, but the wet wool smell was gone. Only processed k'dar smelled that way. Here, in the wild, it had an almost minty tang, a freshness that I associated with my springs in Canada instead of the dead of winter on the coldest side of one of the coldest planets we had yet discovered.

As the fresh air hit us, the Ce'nark raised its head. It made a guttural sound, almost a question against the back of its throat. It looked around, and then wailed so loud I nearly dropped it.

"What the hell did you do?" Lenie asked.

"Nothing." I kept my hand on the Ce'nark's back, patting it as if it were a newborn human that needed to be burped. The wail continued for another minute longer, and then faded into a hiccup. The Ce'nark rested its head on my shoulder and brought one of its hands up to its face. It peered at the nearby forest through its splayed fingers, and its breathing grew rapid.

The other Ce'narks, already in their sled, raised their heads at the sound of the wail. They too splayed their fingers over their faces and looked to the woods.

"I've never seen anything like that," Nathan said softly. The only other man on the team, Luc, put his hand over his face, splayed the fingers and looked as well.

"It creates a slight distortion," he said. "You can separate out the lines of the k'dar from the snow itself this way."

"You think they're looking for more Ce'nark?" Betty asked.

"It seems likely."

"Never speculate," Hildy said. "You know that." And Lenie nodded, but they all looked in the direction of the woods, the direction we were going to go, the direction that had so disturbed my Ce'nark.

Its primary heart was beating so rapidly that I worried for its health. Behind the primary beat was a softer counter rhythm, the secondary heart, the feature that someone had once told me gave the Ce'nark their incredible resilience to any sort of external damage. It took a direct wound through one of the hearts to cripple a Ce'nark. It took wounds through both hearts to kill one instantly. Otherwise, Ce'narks did not die suddenly in the wild. They died in their nests of old age. Often they lingered after one heart failed, sometimes for years, and tended the young in the warmth of the sleeping nests while the parents and bonding pairs hunted and searched for food.

It was an efficient system. Or it had been, until we came along.

Lenie squared her shoulders. "Let's go," she said, and pushed off the nearest truck.

Moving in glide shoes was a lot like skating. It required balance and rhythm and a bit of grace. Betty and Nathan pulled the Ce'nark sled. Luc kept pace with Lenie, and Hildy brought up the rear. I remained in the middle, my balance slightly compromised by the Ce'nark who protested at the unusual movement. It pulled its hand off its face and clung to me as we went, squeaking softly under its breath as we went into the first row of k'dar.

K'dar did most of its growing in the winter, adding bark and long trailing

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branches covered in snow. Going into a k'dar forest was like going into a tunnel made almost entirely of ice, bark, and snow. There was no wind here, and sounds made a strange echo.

We left no imprint on the snow's crust, but the signs of the supplier's team were everywhere. They didn't use glide shoes because they didn't have to. They used regular boots and left footprints behind them. As we passed over their trail, Luc pointed down. I looked as I passed. There was the track of an illegal ground vehicle on the snow's surface. They had taken the Ce'nark out rapidly in some sort of mechanized conveyance. That set the timeline for the kidnapping of the Ce'nark as sometime between my on-planet call and my arrival at the supplier's door two hours later.

Luc led us over the track. Betty peered at everything with the intensity of someone who was making a record. My Ce'nark whimpered, its face buried against my shoulder, its small hands clinging to me so tightly that I was afraid it would rip holes in my parka unit.

By the time we reached the end of the k'dar tunnel, the other two Ce'narks were holding each other, faces buried. The minty tang was gone from the air as if it had never been. It was not replaced by another smell—and that was odd. It almost felt as if there were a smell overlying the tang, but it wasn't something that I could identify.

The track beneath us veered to the right. Luc followed it, disappearing through a small opening in the k'dar canopy. Lenie followed. Nathan and Betty had trouble getting the sled through, but they managed. I started into the canopy when my Ce'nark screamed. It let go of me and grabbed the frozen branches, rooting us in place. Hildy had to glide halfway up a nearby branch to avoid hitting us.

"What the—?" she asked.

I didn't know but I had a guess. I patted the Ce'nark's back, murmuring soothing noises, and slowly tried to disengage its fingers. Every time I loosened one, its grip tightened. Finally, in exasperation, Hildy broke the branches my Ce'nark held.

"We weren't supposed to leave signs of our presence," I said.

"As if that's going to matter," she said, looking at the track we were following.

She had a point. I moved before the Ce'nark had a chance to grab more branches. I glided a few meters, and stopped at the opening to a clearing.

Lenie and the others had stopped here too. The Ce'narks in the sled were completely woven together, their heads hidden inside the tangle of limbs. It was a protective posture; if they had been on the snow, they would have blended in.

Sort of.

For the snow was pocked and melted and covered with black, frozen Ce'nark blood. The remains of half a dozen Ce'narks—I could guess that many by the heads—littered the snow.

My Ce'nark was trembling in my grasp, its head pushing against my chest as if it wanted to hide inside.

I knew that feeling. It had haunted my dreams for decades. I had tried to hide my face in the stomach of a man who had pulled me out of the remains of my family's bungalow. I was emaciated and covered in week-old blood. I remembered nothing from the moment the raiders slaughtered my brother—the last of the family to die—and the man's arms around me one week later.

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Nothing, except the need to bury myself, to hide, to never, ever come out.

"I had no idea they killed this way," I said, mostly to keep myself in the present. I knew that the raiders sometimes slaughtered adult Ce'narks, but I hadn't realized that they had used high powered laser guns with a wide charge that effectively exploded the animal's entire abdomen, exploding both hearts at once. "Now how do we find—?"

I wasn't able to finish the question. An adult Ce'nark leapt from the frozen top of the k'dar, and landed on Luc's back, stabbing him through the neck with a sharpened k'dar stick. Dozens of other Ce'narks dropped around us. Hildy screamed behind me, the sound cut off abruptly. Nathan and Betty crouched protectively near the sled and Lenie started in their direction. Five Ce'narks—the size of small adult humans—barred her way, growling and waving sticks at her.

She stopped, looked at us, and held her hands out in a gesture of peace.

I turned, hoping to lead the way back. Hildy was on the snow behind me, a stick through her open mouth. She was batting at the edge of the wood feebly, but it was clear the effort wouldn't work. I crouched beside her, and she grabbed my hand.

My Ce'nark kept clinging to me, and the other Ce'narks stared at me, but did not approach.

Behind me, Lenie screamed. Her scream mingled with another, and then another, this one male. The Ce'narks were attacking Nathan and Betty too.

But not me.

They stared at me. Their orange eyes were flat and their fangs bared. It was hard to see them against the white ice covering the k'dar branches. Their sticks were the only things that marked them as Ce'narks. Their sticks, their orange eyes, and the green bracelets around their right wrists.

Hildy's grip loosened on mine. Her eyes were open and glazed. I'd seen that look a hundred times before, first on my family, and then on others.

I shook myself. If I didn't stay here, in the present, I would die with the group. The present. I turned toward the Ce'narks. Never in all our contact with them had we encountered Ce'narks that attacked. I had learned that in my reading the night before.

So what made these—?

A Ce'nark raised its stick, its green bracelet flashing against the white snow.

The bracelet. I shivered. I was having trouble breathing, but I figured that was as much from the atmosphere as from my own adrenaline.

I slid my hand out of Hildy's and headed for the sled. The Ce'narks followed. Nathan was defending himself with a bloodied stick. Lenie was rolled in a ball, a stick protruding from her hip.

Betty was missing.

I noted all of that in a matter of moments. I grabbed the sled and pulled it into the clearing—

—as a heat explosion destroyed branches above me. The drivers. They were coming to help us as instructed.

The last thing we needed was help. It would only make things worse.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Stop!"

I saw the first, his head coming through the canopy, the Ce'narks hurrying toward him.

"Go away!" I screamed. "Now!"

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"But—"

"Go! They're defending themselves. They'll slaughter you!"

He didn't have to be told twice. His head disappeared so fast I realized he too was using illegal snow equipment. I continued pulling the sled into the bloody clearing.

Then I stopped, leaving it in the center. I disentangled the Ce'nark from me—it wailed as I did so—and placed it with the others. It sat at the edge of the sled and rocked, its mouth open in a circle of pain.

I left it there—I left all three of them there—and backed away. The adult Ce'narks were watching me, but they weren't going to the infants.

They weren't attacking any more either.

I sat down, even though my pumping adrenaline told me not to. I sat down, and I waited. They watched me. It was a stalemate, punctuated by the shivering sobs of the two clinging infant Ce'narks. I had to let the adults know that this was not a trap. They had their children back. They didn't have to fight us.

I studied them for a moment, my gaze on the sticks. Their orange eyes met my gaze, and it seemed as if they were waiting too. But for what?

My Ce'nark was watching me as well, rocking, its mouth still open. They all expected me to do something. But what? Did they think I had set up a trap? How did I convince them it wasn't?

And then I knew.

I reached inside the pocket of my parka and removed the bracelet for my Ce'nark. I held it up in front of the attacking Ce'narks.

And then I tossed it toward the sled.

The bracelet spun in mid-air. It looked foreign and out of place, gray against all that white. It rose high, crested, and fell. It didn't land in the snow. It broke the crust and slipped in, disappearing beside the sled.

My Ce'nark looked at me and raised its hands toward me like a child wanting to be picked up. The adult Ce'narks looked at it, then looked at me, and scurried across the destroyed expanse of snow.

They surrounded the sled, grabbed the two unattached Ce'nark infants, and hurried away, leaving mine. It still reached for me.

"Go." The voice was soft, raspy, almost a whisper.

It was Lenie. She had crawled closer to me, one hand on her hip. She had left a bloody trail in the snow.

"Go to it," she said. "They wouldn't take it. That means it has no one."

But me. That was what she implied. No one but me.

I crossed the snow, my heart pounding. There was no sign of the other Ce'narks. It was as if they hadn't been here at all.

I bent toward it, and it grabbed me, nearly pulling me down. Then it climbed up my parka until it was inside my arms, holding my neck and forcing my face beside its. It ran its hands over my skin, touching me as if it had thought it would never see me again.

It was trembling.

So was I.

It didn't look at the bodies in the snow, the Ce'nark bodies, but I did. And I thought I recognized the faces. The mother. The father. The siblings. All destroyed.

Forever.

I wrapped my arms around the Ce'nark, and carried it back to the group. As I did, I used my security links to signal the drivers that it was safe now.

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A vibration ran through my arm, signaling their affirmative response. They would be coming soon, with something to get the wounded out of here.

While I waited, I performed some rudimentary first aid on Lenie, used snow to stop Nathan's bleeding, and found Betty uninjured but pinned by sticks through her clothing deep within the canopy. Luc and Hildy were dead.

Through it all, the Ce'nark shuddered against me, its tiny hands clinging so tightly that at one point, I thought it would shut off my air. The drivers showed up, and loaded the wounded into the trucks.

The Ce'nark and I sat up front. No one spoke to me. They looked at the Ce'nark as my failure, the deaths as my fault. No one saw that without me, the entire team would have died.

But I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. When we returned to the compound, I went to my room and fed the Ce'nark in its tank.

And waited.

The downloadable information on infant Ce'narks had to do with their physical care, but not their emotional states. My Ce'nark was unwilling to let me go. I had to sleep in its nest, take sponge baths because Ce'narks couldn't cope with warm water, and feed it by hand every two hours. Nothing seemed to ease its need to hold me, nothing at all.

Five days into my ordeal, Lenie showed up. She was limping, but otherwise seemed fine. She came into my room without waiting for an invitation, and sat on my bed as she had before.

"You saved our lives," she said. Somehow the acknowledgment, coming so late, meant little. I had had time to think, and I realized that my actions were only a small part of the drama that had taken place in the k'dar woods.

"The Ce'nark saved you," I said. "They looked at me as one of them, a part of a bonded pair."

She sighed and stood. "The Ce'narks learned that behavior from us. I reviewed the vids. They were wearing bracelets. They were some of the Ce'narks we returned to the wild."

"They were defending themselves."

She looked at me.

I shrugged. "It's not speculation. It's obvious." I shifted my Ce'nark to my other arm. I was finally beginning to get used to its weight. "Now you can seal off the k'dar forests, use the video as proof that Ce'narks are violent and dangerous."

"And condemn hundreds of them to death when their bonded humans abandon them?" she asked.

"They won't be abandoned," I said. "Not if you word the release right."

She closed her eyes. "Human-raised infants are fine?"

"Yes."

"A ruling that will lead to more poaching."

"I doubt the poachers will live through it," I said.

Her eyes opened. The Ce'nark had changed. We had changed them. By stealing their young, slaughtering their adults. By bringing death into their midst.

She raised a hand, and ran it along my Ce'nark's head. "Have you named her yet?"

"Her?"

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She tilted the Ce'nark's head slightly, revealing pink ridges in the throat. "Her. The sexual characteristics are forming now."

"She won't let me go. I think she's traumatized."

Lenie's gaze met mine. Then she looked away, and held out her hands as if they were more interesting than our conversation.

"The vid gives us more information than we've ever had on Ce'narks in the wild." She was telling me something, something else beneath her words. "They use tools. They can communicate well enough to plan an attack."

"They waited in ambush," I said.

"They understood what you were telling them when you threw that bracelet. They understood that we were returning the infants, not stealing them." She closed her hands into fists. "We thought because of the rigidity of their bonding, because infants in captivity retained their infant behavior as adults much like domesticated Earth animals, that they had limited intelligence. We were wrong."

I waited. I had never heard a Reclamation officer admit a mistake.

"Do you know what this means?" she asked.

I did. It meant a higher level of prosecution for anyone caught kidnapping infant Ce'narks. It meant murder charges for anyone who killed one.

It meant that, well-intentioned or not, we had enslaved a sentient race.

I wrapped my arms around my Ce'nark. She sighed and leaned her head against me. "What do I do about her?"

"I don't know," Lenie said. "This is new to us. We have to throw out most of what we know."

I said, because I had to, because I couldn't keep quiet: "There were tests, you know. That slaughtered group of Ce'narks. It was her family."

"I doubt she'll ever bond again." She didn't look at me as she said that. She wiped her hands on her skirt, and then she stood. "I'm sorry, Marisa."

I stood too. I didn't know what else to do. She had just made it clear to me that everything was different now. To abandon my Ce'nark was to condemn her to death. And if I did that, I would be charged with the murder of a sentient being.

I placed my hand on the back of the Ce'nark's head. She snuggled closer. As if I could have abandoned her anyway. I had taken my job to prevent the harming of innocents, not to harm them myself. I just hadn't expected to have to care for one, especially not one as delicate as my Ce'nark.

"What happens to me now?" I asked. "I mean, I've got her."

"Yes," Lenie said. "You do."

"And I can't give her up, can I?"

Lenie shook her head.

"She changes everything."

Lenie's smile was gentle. "Infants usually do."

I work on Earth now. Iceland, Finland, Norway. Some parts of Siberia, Alaska, and any other cold climate my bosses can think of. Most of the Ce'nark owners live in these climates. Those that don't are rich enough to create the proper natural environment for the Ce'nark in the hottest climates. Someone else worries about them.

My job is subtler now. I infiltrate Ce'nark shows and vet clinics; I start neighborhood clubs for Ce'nark owners. Some I educate in the art of caring for another sentient being. Others I turn in for all sorts of flagrant abuses.

Celine, my Ce'nark, has slowly come to like this life. She has spotted

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problems long before I ever would. I guess her early life attuned her to them.

Oh, she still has nightmares. Awful, horrible nightmares. Sometimes I hear that wail echoing from her tank. I wake her and hold her, and she shivers in my arms.

And sometimes, truth be told, she wakes me in just the same way, from a nearly identical dream.

There was a reason we bonded. A reason she chose me above all the other humans she saw. We're just beginning to understand that Ce'nark see even more than we do when they look at someone else. They see matching patterns. They see similar needs.

They communicate on several more levels.

She doesn't like Earth. There are too many humans here for her, and we're much too violent. We've always been more violent than Ce'narks have.

I've promised her an early retirement. Lenie's promised me work in Ce'nark research on K'Dar'Ak. But I doubt I'll take her up on it. I don't like the quiet life. It gives me too much time to think. Too much time to feel. And neither Celine nor I like to feel much.

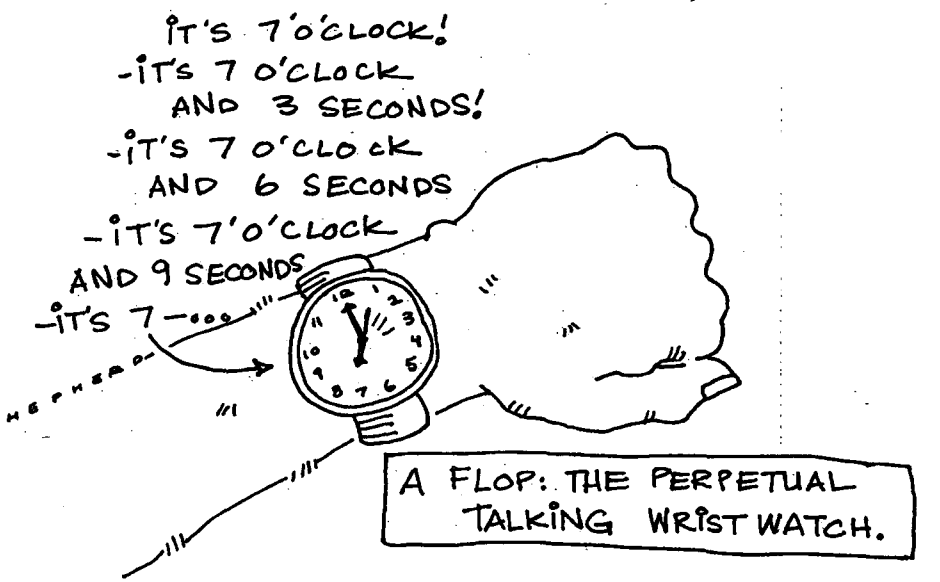
We're alike in that too.

I'm still not sure I understand nurturing. But I understand bonding. I just hadn't realized that humans did it too. We're not as obvious about it as Ce'narks, but we're just as rigid about it.

Only most of us haven't realized it yet.

Sometimes I miss the undercover work. But only sometimes.

Mostly I just wonder how I ever managed all those years—alone. O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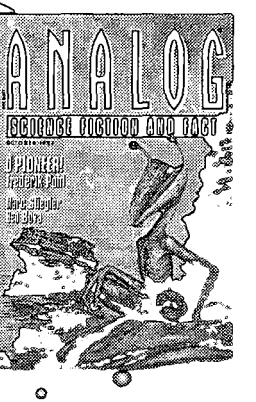

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RECALLED TO HOME

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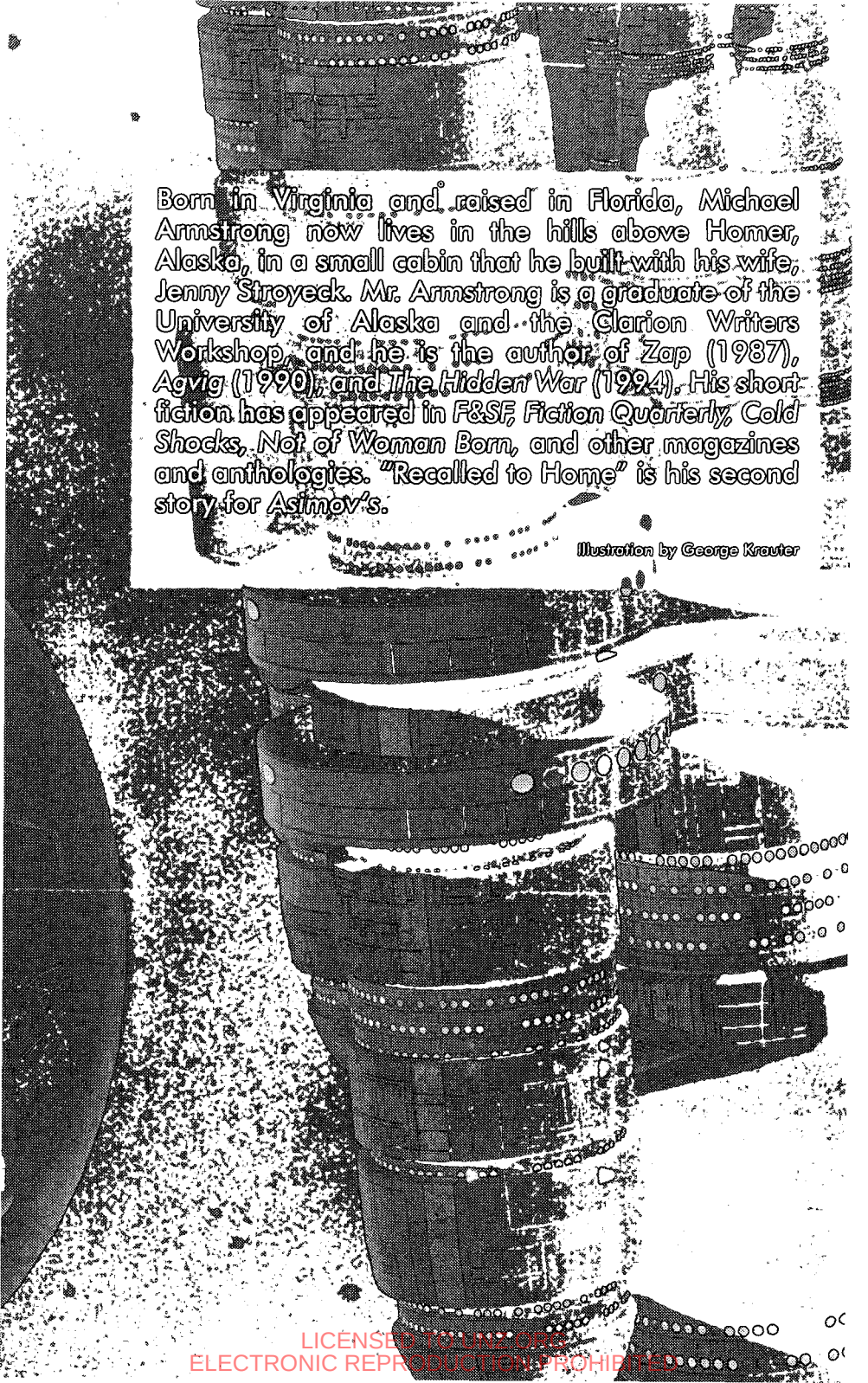

Born in Virginia and raised in Florida, Michael Armstrong now lives in the hills above Homer, Alaska, in a small cabin that he built with his wife, Jenny Stroyeck. Mr. Armstrong is a graduate of the University of Alaska and the Clarion Writers Workshop, and he is the author of *Zap* (1987), *Agvig* (1990), and *The Hidden War* (1994). His short fiction has appeared in *F&SF*, *Fiction Quarterly*, *Cold Shocks*, *Not of Woman Born*, and other magazines and anthologies. "Recalled to Home" is his second story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by George Krauter

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Philip Samuelson was nursing his last beer on Whiskey Baker Station when he and Captain Nance Bloom got the recall orders. The Last Bar had grown quiet the way station bars would after the band's last set, when the dancing had stopped, and a bunch of sweaty sailors cooled down and waited for the anti-intoxicants to sober them up enough so they could go back to their ships. At the narrow end of the pie-shaped room the four guys in the band packed their instruments. Phil looked at one of them—a kid barely sixteen—and thought of himself at that age, just heading out into far-Sol space. The kid looked as scared and alone as he had been those twenty years ago. Shave his head and give him a red queue and beard, and the hard eyes of six missions, and he could be his brother.

Under the table Nance nudged his leg with her foot and smiled at him. Uh-huh: he knew what that meant. Yeah, he'd be ready to go soon enough, back to their ship, the *Ta Yu*. Staring at her magenta eyes, her long silver braid gleaming against her otherwise bare scalp, he wondered how he would tell her what he'd have to tell her.

"Sirs?" a big burly shore patroller asked.

An ox of a woman looked down at them, her skin as black as her armor and sidearm, as shiny as the stubby ponytail at the top of her shaved pate. Bera, he remembered her name, one of the grunts serving under Zha, the *Ta Yu*'s Minister of the Militia, who answered to Phil, the People's Representative. He'd been expecting her and her orders. Had planned it this way, really, just like he'd planned for his stint on the *Ta Yu* to end here on Whiskey Baker. Phil nodded at Bera.

"Comrade," Nance said.

"Mission orders, sirs." Bera handed them both flimsies. The shore patroller nodded at them, duty done, and moved through the rest of the bar, tracking down others from their ship.

"Orders? No one ever tells me anything. Damn system." Nance shook her head, then grinned at him. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget who you are."

Phil smiled to show he understood. Mission orders came through the People's Representative, a reminder of the old Soyuz belief that naval ships served on behalf of the people and not the military. Captains carried out mission orders; the People's Representative issued them. Sometimes, he thought, the rep even made up the orders, if the Soyuz, the Union, didn't send new ones—or if the captain forgot her position.

He broke the flimsy's seal, skimmed through the naval coding, down to the important information. ALL CREW OF THE EXALTED *TA YU,* POSSESSION IN GREAT MEASURE: RECALLED TO HOME the orders read. LIFTOFF AT 1200 COMMAND DAY 647, RETURN TO ZULU BAKER 1, SECTOR 1;ULTIMATE RETURN ABLE 1, SECTOR 1.

"Home?" Nance asked, looking at her own orders. "We're going back to Sol?" Able 1, Sector 1: the Sol System.

" 'Reserves recalled to duty,' " Phil read on. " 'Where applicable, active-duty clause invoked.' "

"We were supposed to head out to the edge of the Beyond." She shook her head. "I don't get it. You told me those would be our orders."

"I *thought* those would be our orders." I'd set it up that way, he said to himself. Set it up that the *Ta Yu* and her sister ship, the *Gathering Together,* would rendezvous at Whiskey Baker, then head out on a general patrol through Sector 87, the back of the Beyond. He'd called in a lot of favors to get his last mission set up that way.

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"Phil—" Nance stared hard at him. "You haven't been jerking me around?"

"No—*no!*" He knew what she meant: it happened a lot that a People's Rep would bed the captain to control her completely. "Look at the transmission code."

"Otherspace transmission?"

"It's from Sol Command, First World space. Sent direct." He tried to remember how those got sent—a drone ship making jumps, transmitting through an Otherspace communications link. "OST orders override mission-start orders." He shook his head. "Something doesn't seem right. You ever hear of the First World issuing OST mission orders to a Second World ship? Ever?"

"No. . . ."

"Nance, that's as close to real-time as you can get between the Beyond and Earth. Those orders are no more than a year old, Home time. A year! Usually the First World forgets about us until—"

"—we're recalled to home."

"Yeah, but not now. Not this way."

"Recalled to home," Nance said again. "That's, what—?"

Phil looked at the relativistic time calculation on the orders. "Eighty objective years." Phil pounded his fist. "Recalled! Sonofabitch! I've got six subjective months on the reserve clause—that's it. Did you ever hear of someone with under a year's reserve clause getting recalled?" He shoved his orders at her.

"Six hours subjective to Zulu Baker Able—that's practically at the edge of Whiskey Baker system," Nance said, "then back to Sol System, maybe six months more subjective."

"I can't do that."

"Have to do that. 'Order of the People.' Your bosses, Phil." She frowned, read further down on her orders, then looked at his. Nance broke out into a smile. "Phil, we've both been assigned to First World duty—retraining! We won't be doomed to Second World space. First World!"

"Eighty years!" Phil said.

"Eighty, fifty—you'll catch up. They won't dump us right into cutting edge technology, you know that."

"That's not it. It's the *time*."

"Phil . . ." Nance looked at him closely. "I, uh, I assumed you wanted to do that—ask to do your reserve duty on the *Ta Yu,* go back home."

Phil turned away from her, then looked back. "Nance, I can't. All those years . . ."

"So?" She glared back at him.

Damn. He hadn't meant to tell her like this. Nance's tour ran out when she returned the *Ta Yu* for retrofitting and reassignment at a First World base, maybe two more years subjective time. Phil's active duty tour had run out ten hours ago, as he'd planned, at Whiskey Baker.

"I can't," Phil said quietly.

"*Can't?* Phil, we haven't talked about it, but I had thought, you know, maybe we could form a bond unit." She waved the flimsy. "With retraining, it would fit perfectly."

"Nance . . ." He bit his lip; only one way to do this. "I set this up long ago, before we met. I tried to tell you, but—"

"You've got another bond mate? Someone on a relativistic shuttle who's

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been bouncing back and forth, burning up objective time so she could stay with you?" She pushed away from the table.

"No, not that. It's . . . family. My brother and sister-in-law, they're in a deep-sleep freighter nearing the middle of the Beyond, heading to Kin's Star. I'm supposed to rendezvous with them around Thule, Kin 6." He looked away. "Whiskey Baker is on a short-jump trade run that would put me in the Kin system within two or three years subjective of Sam and Vicky. I'd planned to get off here, wait for a ship."

"*Family?*"

"My only brother—only sibling," Phil said. "Our parents abandoned us to the Soyuz when we were young. No uncles, aunts, or cousins. Sam and Vicky left long before you and I met."

Her face slack and empty, she stared at him. "Why didn't you tell me before . . . before we—"

Phil reached out to her, took her hands in his hands. "I couldn't . . . *didn't* think you would need to know, and then when you needed to know, I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't think when I was elected to be the People's Rep that we'd, uh, get together. When we did, I thought it would be just an affair, that nothing would spark."

"But it did." She glared at him. "Didn't it?"

He nodded. "It did. Damn!" He pounded the table. "I wish—Nance, I wish there were some way we could go to Thule together, some way I could have you *and* my family, but I don't know. Family, Nance—you know about family."

"I know," she said, looking down. "And now—now we both have orders that will take us home together."

"*Orders.* Why the hell would the Navy call the whole crew back? Any of us back? Did you apply for First World recall?"

"I'd thought of it . . . No."

"And a drone message! Why would they spend those kind of resources on an Otherspace message? They're cheap bastards."

"Maybe—" She shrugged. "Who knows?" Nance jerked her head up.

Phil felt it, too, an all-quarters alert on his comm band, the signal vibrating away silently, but forcefully, on the hard bone against his wrist. "Uh-oh," he said softly as he deciphered the code.

"Six-fourteen-five," Nance said.

Phil felt the blood rush from his face as he stood up and ran to the hallway, to the suit lockers, Nance right ahead of him.

Six-fourteen-five: Amok ship.

As they got to the hallway, two pressure doors on either end slammed shut. They had to raid sixty lockers, but everyone in the Last Bar got suited up inside of two minutes. Phil helped the kid from the band, Rhab—who had apparently missed the suit drills—lock his helmet and turn on the suit's intercom. Phil and Nance went through this drill about every week, but some of the stationers clearly had never been through a Code Six exercise.

Nance pounded on the pressure doors. "Damn! We can't get to the *Ta Yu.*"

"Marena's got it under control. Nothing we could do anyway."

"Maybe." Nance switched to a secure channel on her suit to Martushev, the station commander, and began shouting orders Phil couldn't hear. She held up four fingers, two, then six, and Phil switched over to channel 426 just as he heard her say "—nuke."

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A view came up in front of them, a ghostly image projected before their helmets of another ship heading out of control toward Whiskey Baker Station. The amok ship drifted toward them, port side facing, with only the trailing edge showing of its ablation shield, the tough coating on its bow that took the brunt of the thermal build-up when a ship came out of jump, or skimmed atmosphere.

The ship—a Class 3 deep-survey, light destroyer, like the *Ta Yu*—seemed to have lost deceleration and in-system controls. Phil tried to figure out how that could happen, and why the heck the captain had risked coming out of jump with no controls. Then he thought if the captain did that, maybe she didn't have a choice. No starship would dare approach a solar system until it had slowed to a near-dead crawl.

In the image Phil saw station tugs rushing out to the destroyer. Beams slapped at the ship, pathetically trying to slow it down. Phil tried to recall the emergency procedure for an amok ship. Right. Power up the big station laser, the one used to maintain orbit, and hope to hell you could get it turned around and aimed in time. He had another thought.

" 'Nuke,' Captain?" he asked.

"Yeah." Behind her tinted visor he saw her tonguing controls, whispering authorization codes. "Watch this."

A missile streaked out from Whiskey Baker to the amok ship. Phil felt his gut grow cold when he understood what that meant. Even docked, the *Ta Yu* had gotten a shot off. "You're going to nuke the amok ship?"

"If the first option doesn't work, Phil."

"Her armor—"

"Down. She's Soyuz—look at that profile. That's the first order when amok. You unfold your armor." Nance clapped him on the shoulder. "Hang on, though—Martushev has a few tricks up his sleeve."

Suddenly the hall lights dimmed as the station's power got sucked into that laser. Rhab yelped. Nance reached out to him, showed him and the other stationers how to turn on their suit lights. The hall went dark, only the pale ruby glow of the suits shining.

They all stared at the drama, at the side of the ship moving toward them, a black teardrop. More tug lasers stabbed at the ship, focusing at the stern. Good tactic, Phil thought: they were trying to edge it around, reduce the area that would hit and turning the ablation shield toward them so the station's laser wouldn't harm the amok ship. Maybe it would just skim the station. Even a near-miss could be fatal, though—there was a lot of mass in a Class 3 destroyer.

Something hummed in the station then, and the image of the destroyer turned away. Working, Phil realized. It's working. Then the image shifted again and Phil understood what was happening: the station turned on its axis, bringing the big laser around to bear directly.

"Hold on," Nance said. "Phil—"

"Got him," he said. Phil grabbed Rhab as the station quit rotating and they lost gravity.

The lights flicked back on, off, on, then off again. Beams from the tugs snapped off, and they peeled away in the image. Here she comes, Phil thought, and then a huge beam kicked out, dead center on the bow. Still the destroyer came down, stars disappearing around its edge as the ship came closer and closer. The beam held steady, spreading out in its apparent width as the destroyer came down on them. Phil bit his lip, felt his breath-

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ing grow shallow. Numbers flicked on his display as a read-out showed the distance and time to impact. He tongued it off. To hell with knowing.

In came the destroyer, bigger and bigger. Rhab whimpered. Nance pulled him in close to her. Images of the falling ship kept flickering from perspective to perspective, trying to keep the size the same, but it came so fast the outside sensors couldn't keep up.

The image slowed. Phil blinked, thinking it might be the projection screwing up. He tongued the read-out back on. The distance to impact figures slowed. Slowed. The big flat egg slowed. The numbers flicked by less quickly, slower, slower.

Stopped.

Phil let out a breath.

"She's holding," Nance said.

"Maybe—" Phil said as the impact figures rolled by again. "Okay." The numbers stopped, held at two klicks out.

"All right," Rhab whispered.

From well beyond the amok ship a bright star bloomed, a quickly expanding dome of intense white light.

"What the—?" someone said.

"The nuke," Nance said. "Didn't need it."

"All right," someone in the bar repeated. Shouts roared through the comm links as the news spread.

The station lights came back up, the floor became a floor again, and in a few minutes the all-clear sounded. Phil kept his helmet on, watching the image of the destroyer. Tugs moved in to turn it around, and as the ship rotated on its long axis, they saw why it had been in trouble.

Ripped right down the starboard side, the destroyer was missing half its mass—half its decks. Like a huge claw, something had torn away the whole starboard side of the amok ship.

"That's the *Gathering Together,*" Nance said.

Phil felt his crotch tighten. *Ts'ui,* the *Gathering Together*—she'd been right behind them, two jumps following, their sister ship.

And she'd seen battle.

After the *Gathering Together* had docked, after the rescue team had taken off her dead and wounded—including most of her bridge crew—the captain and her people's rep met with Nance, Marena, and Phil in the *Ta Yu*'s staff room.

"How'd you go amok, Captain Evans?" Nance asked.

Evans, a gray-haired short woman with hard, pale-blue eyes, rubbed her face. "We were sweeping up behind the *Ta Yu* when we made a jump before Whiskey Baker," she said. "Right as we were powering up to go into the hole, a First World destroyer popped out next to us. She had Soyuz signals, but didn't answer any of our hails."

"First World?" Marena asked. "In Mid-Tech territory?"

"First World." Evans turned away for a moment. "Sure, the runs cross sometimes, and we just avoid each other. This one didn't turn away, though. No, this one fired."

"Shit," Nance muttered.

"Tech War," Evans said, saying aloud what they all had guessed.

Tech War. At the words, Phil shuddered. Tech War, a war between the four levels of Soyuz technologies: First World, the leading edge, the off-plan-

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et habitats that surrounded Earth and the other planets in the mother solar system; Second World, what a First Worlder became the moment she made her first long jump beyond twenty-five objective years; Third World, developing technologies on olive-class planets in the Beyond; and finally, Fourth World, the pre-industrial age technology of Mother Earth and other green-class, pristine planets. High Tech, Mid Tech, Low Tech, and No Tech, and only on the edges shall they meet.

That had been the always shifting balance made necessary by time-dilation, by the rapid cultural changes that would wreck any society if a culture didn't have the time to adapt. A high-tech ship could go out on a hundred light-year run, burn up two years of subjective time, and by the time her crew got back home, discover their high-tech had been surpassed by rapid progress. You signed on in not only a time frame, but a technology, and stuck with it, to keep from going insane. To keep higher technologies from destroying lesser technologies, the fragile union relied on a system of trust. The First World could not prey on other worlds, because once you left the First World, the predator could become victim. For tech to fight against tech was to invite chaos—a Tech War.

Tech War, Phil thought. A Tech War meant—he didn't want to think about the implications of a Tech War.

"Maybe it was a renegade," Nance said. "Pirates. You know the talk, Evans."

She nodded. "Maybe. But we had gotten First World orders to go to that jump point—orders meant for us. Then a First World ship meets us. Maybe a pirate could do that, but it suggests coordinated First World action."

"Wait a second," Nance said. "You got First World orders to go to a jump *before* Whiskey Baker?"

"Right."

"We logged you as last taking a jump at Zulu Delta Four. There's not a jump between Zulu Delta Four and Whiskey Baker." Nance looked over at Marena. "Is there?"

Nance's second punched in some commands on her console, then looked up. "No—not on our charts."

Evans frowned at her. "Yeah, that's what the charts say—our charts say. But the First World Soyuz sent us orders—a drone message sent through an Otherspace comm link—to go to Echo Mike One."

Marena punched in the name. "Echo Mike One? Not listed."

"That's the name. Our pilot checked out the coordinates, and there it was. First World finds new jumps all the time. We figured it would be a shortcut to Whiskey Baker."

"First World issued direct OST orders?" Nance asked again. Evans nodded. "First World doesn't issue direct orders to Second World ships unless we're recalled."

"I know," Evans said. "Still, they did, we went, and we ran into Soyuz ships from the First World."

"You think they're rebels, a faction of the First World Soyuz?" Phil asked.

"Or Loyalists," Evans said. She shrugged. "Who knows? You can't second-guess First World politics, much less technology. We took our hits and ran like hell. If there's a Tech War, if someone from the First World is preying on Mid Tech ships—"

Evans didn't have to finish the thought. Phil and everyone else figured it

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out: if there was a Tech War, the Soyuz was dead. The loose alliance was ruined.

And a Second World ship . . . the *Gathering Together* showed what happened when a First Worlder attacked a ship from the Second World.

Later, after the officers had broken for the mid-day meal, they came around to the subject of the *Ta Yu*'s orders. Something had been bothering Phil about them, something the *Gathering Together*'s experience made him wonder about.

"Captain Evans," he asked, "did it occur to you that your orders to Echo Mike One might have been a set-up?"

"Ambush?"

"Exactly. First World drew you there and pounced on you."

Nance turned to Phil. "I see where you're going." She shook her head. "No—no, it can't be."

"The *Ta Yu* has been recalled to Earth," Phil said. "Our orders came just before the *Gathering Together* went amok. A direct Otherspace comm link, via drone, too. Usually the people's rep unseals the recall orders—" he looked over at Wu "—that have been set up years ago, at the start of a mission."

"Sometimes First World issues mission orders directly," Wu said. "It happens. If there should be a First Contact, for instance, an encounter with aliens. That's why the *Gathering Together* took the orders seriously. We thought it might be something like that."

"I see your point, People's Representative," Evans said to Phil. "One OST message from the First World is an anomaly. Two in the same system, to sister ships?" She raised an eyebrow mockingly.

"That's my question," Phil said. "That's what bothers me about this whole thing."

"Second World ships get recalled all the time," Nance said.

"True. You have crew to rotate home?" Evans asked.

"*Yeah,*" Nance said. She looked over at Phil, glared at him. "Some of us had planned to end their tours and remain in the Beyond. Oddly, we got orders for the whole crew to be recalled. *Everyone.* But the *Ta Yu* isn't scheduled for a retrofit yet. Still, you know First World: the hull could be entirely obsolete and they'd just scrap it."

Evans shook her head. "No, not if the *Ta Yu* still had use as a Mid Tech ship. Usually, you meet at a neutral point between the First and Second Worlds, and transfer crew. Maybe they'd pass on some benign technology—better comm systems, things like that. The whole crew and ship, though. . . ?"

"I don't like it," Marena said.

"Something else," Phil said. "We've got orders to return home through Zulu Baker One, a jump point at the edge of this system."

Marena tapped on her console, muttering. "Should have checked this earlier. Of course—Zulu Baker One isn't on our charts, either." She looked up. "I *definitely* don't like this."

"Another ambush?" Nance bit her lip. "I still can't believe it."

"We could test the orders," Evans said. "With the *Gathering Together.*"

"Yeah," Nance said. "I see."

"How?" Phil asked.

"The *Gathering Together* is finished," Evans said. "Scrap. I lost my pilot,

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and if there's a Tech War, no way will I get another pilot. You know how hard it is to get pilots."

Right, Phil thought. It wasn't like you stumbled over William's Syndrome kids every day, savants who couldn't add numbers, but who could navigate in and out of the warped space/time inside Otherspace.

"We can repair her, then send the *Gathering Together* in with your transponders as a remotely piloted decoy," said Evans. "Slave the controls to the *Ta Yu*. We'll take them both out to the coordinates you got in your orders, hide the *Ta Yu* in the *Gathering Together*'s tail, see what happens. If someone fires on it—"

"Then we run like hell in the *Ta Yu,*" Nance said.

"You got it," said Evans.

The *Ta Yu*'s recall orders gave them seven standard days to get the *Gathering Together* in enough shape to fly. With both crews working double shifts, they stripped the *Gathering Together* down to a bare shell with nothing more than a real-time command and communications system and barely functioning drives. A copy of the *Ta Yu*'s codes had been substituted into the *Gathering Together*'s transponders: from a distance, she'd ping like the *Ta Yu*. While they made the ship ready, Phil and Wu polled their crews. Both ships would be going out possibly into harm's way, under suspicious orders. Custom dictated crew approval.

On the day they took the ships out, Phil and Nance rode the lift together to the *Ta Yu*'s bridge. They stood close to each other, silent. Not daring to say what needed to be said, Phil thought. As the lift slowed, he reached out to Nance, touched the fingertips of her hand with his fingers.

"When we get through this," he said. "If the recall orders really are an ambush and we're not going home—"

"*If* we get through this, Phil," Nance said. She took his hand and squeezed it hard. "Yeah, we'll talk. Figure out where to go next: you, me—us."

He squeezed her hand back. "Nance, I want you to know . . . if we don't—"

"Shh," she said. "Not now."

The lift stopped, and the door opened. They got off, entering the short corridor before the bridge. Captain Evans and Wu met them there outside the *Ta Yu*'s ready room. Nance had let her use the room, to prepare. The two captains and their people's representatives walked onto the bridge together.

"Rise for the People," Marena said as they came onto the bridge.

Phil smiled at the custom: the bridge crew rose for him, for Wu, to honor the People, the Soyuz. "Thank you, Ministers," he said to the crew members chosen by each section to lead them from the bridge. "At your stations. It pleases the crew that we prepare for our mission."

The bridge spread out in a heptagon, consoles along four walls of the seven-sided room, and the view stages before the other three walls. Nance sat in the command chair, at the center of the bridge. Evans took the helm to her left, and Phil sat behind her in a chair next to Nance. Nance turned to Marena at her right, serving as the Minister of Communications.

"Hail the station commander. Request tugs and clearance to leave for two ships."

"Hailing," Marena said. "Request transmitted."

On one of the smaller stages at the front of the bridge appeared a full-dimensional image of Martushev, sitting at his command console. "Cleared

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for undocking, Captain," he said. "Our tugs are at your service."

"Thank you, Commander," Nance said. "Helm, slave controls to the *Gathering Together*, establish auxiliary helm."

"Controls slaved." Evans tapped a button, and a second set of controls popped up next to the main controls. "Auxiliary helm to the *Gathering Together* established."

"Undock the *Gathering Together*."

"Undocking, Captain," said Evans.

On the main stage, an image from the exterior station sensors showed the *Gathering Together* being pushed away by the Whiskey Baker tugs.

"Undock the *Ta Yu*."

"*Ta Yu* undocking. Station tugs engaged, taking us out."

The other small stage flickered on: the *Ta Yu*'s perspective as the ship moved out of the station. They came up behind the *Gathering Together,* sister ship ahead. The image from Whiskey Baker's perspective showed the two ships next to each other, a kilometer apart, tugs moving them away from the station. Marena hit a button, and the station view shifted to an aft view from the *Ta Yu* that showed Whiskey Baker Station diminishing to a small disk. The tugs let go, came into the aft view, and fell back as they turned around and went home.

"Escort disengaged," Nance said. She turned to the image of the station chief. "Glad to be rid of us, Commander?"

Martushev nodded. "Glad for us—not for you. Good passage."

"Thank you, Commander. Perhaps we'll see you soon." The image blinked out. "Marena, let's stick to one main view now, from the *Gathering Together*'s perspective."

"Switching view."

Before them they saw empty space, the edge of Whiskey Baker system beyond, and on the smaller stages, the stern of the *Gathering Together*. Nance stood up, waved at her chair. "Captain Evans, it's your ship that is forward. You may take command now."

Evans nodded, changed seats with Nance. Wu, Evans' second, switched places with the Minister at the engineering console; the *Ta Yu*'s section ministers—Zha, Marena—filled in the other positions on the bridge. Evans looked around at her temporary crew, her face grim. She gripped the armrests of her chair.

"No captain likes to lose her ship," Nance said. She sat down at the helm.

"Thank you, Captain. Maybe we won't." Evans said. "Captain—Helm, power up in-system drives, both ships."

"In-system drive on," Nance said.

Before them, the *Gathering Together*'s drive roared on, the engine blast making the ship ahead appear to be a bright star. Faked transponder codes would make the *Gathering Together* sound like the *Ta Yu*. Once they reached full speed, debris would begin to flake off from the *Gathering Together*'s ablation shield at the bow, creating a comet's tail a thousand klicks long, a tail made slightly longer by the *Ta Yu*'s own shield debris. In the shadow of the tail the *Ta Yu* would hide, so that they would appear to be one ship—would move as one ship, sound like one ship.

"Helm, bring up the system drives to full speed, please," said Evans.

"Accelerating to full speed, outsystem," said Nance.

"Set course for Zulu Baker One."

"Course set, Zulu Baker One."

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Evans sat back, looked at the main image. "How long to the jump point?"

"Five hours, forty-five minutes," Nance said.

The *Gathering Together*'s captain nodded. "Take her out easy. Ministers, while we're waiting, let's run full diagnostics on our systems. Zha, if you could tweak all you can out of my weapons systems?"

"Aye," said the Minister of the Militia. "Most definitely."

"Now we wait," said Evans. Nance came up to Evans. The captains glanced at Phil, Wu, then motioned the two men over to them.

"People's Representatives?" asked Nance. "We need you to poll the crews again." Evans pulled out a folded-up flimsy from a pocket, handed it to them.

Phil read the simple question, handed it to Wu. He read it, and nodded. "It's Wu's call, but I'll see what my crew says, too."

"Thank you, comrades," said Evans. "If you can have an answer by jump point. . . ?" They nodded. "Thank you."

As they neared Zulu Baker One, Phil rode up to the bridge. Serenit, the *Ta Yu*'s pilot, came onto the bridge with him. The bridge ministers and captains rose for them, but from the way they looked at Serenit, he knew who commanded more respect. Anyone could be a People's Representative; pilots were far rarer. Serenit took her seat to the captain's right, Phil to her left. Wu had taken up his position at the engineering console hours ago. It had been easy for him to get a quick answer from his crew. The *Ta Yu*'s crew had taken a bit longer.

The ships had accelerated to a hundredth light speed, fast enough to distort the view of planetoids and Oort Cloud debris zipping by. Whiskey Baker's sun was but a slightly brighter star among a field of stars.

"Approaching Zulu Baker One, Captain," Nance said.

"Power up star drive," Evans said.

"Star drive powering up."

"Pilot?" Evans said to Serenit.

"I am ready when you need my services," Serenit said. The *Gathering Together* wouldn't be punching into Otherspace, Phil knew, but the formality was that you didn't head to a jump without the pilot's approval.

"People's Representative Samuelson?" Evans asked him. "What are the desires of the masses?"

The first question, Phil thought, in response to the recall orders. Evans wouldn't ask the second one until she needed to. "The crew and the people desire the *Ta Yu* to return home, as the mission orders demand," said Phil.

"People's Representative Wu?" Evans asked. "What are the desires of the crew of the *Gathering Together?*" This question was for the record, Phil understood. The *Gathering Together* had no further mission orders—as far as the First World knew, she had been destroyed.

"The crew and the people desire the *Gathering Together* to provide support for our sister ship," said Wu.

"Then let us begin." Evans raised a finger. "Helm: initiate."

"Star drive engaged."

"Accelerate at tenth increments. Take her up to jump speed, but hold on the jump."

"Aye. Accelerating."

"Engineer?" Evans looked over at Wu. "How's she holding?"

"Steady. Some stress points." Wu suddenly looked up. "It's a good thing

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you don't want to take her into a jump, Captain. She'd fold right away."

"So noted. Thank you, sir."

"Zulu Baker One dead ahead," said Nance. "Acceleration approaching jump insert, Captain. Two hundred seconds to insert."

"Ship coming out of jump," said Zha, serving as the Minister of Militia. "She's Soyuz—not Second World."

A red dot appeared against the dark of space, then grew to a flattened teardrop, a modified design of the standard Soyuz hull. No comet tail, Phil saw—no ablation shield flaking away. He glanced over at Evans, saw her face grow pale. Her lower lip began to shudder.

"That look like the ship that blasted you the first time?" Nance asked her.

"Same design, maybe not the same ship. She's First World, all right. Raise forward armor. Launch remote sensors."

"Forward armor raised. Launching," said Zha.

A new image appeared on one of the smaller stages, a perspective showing the long comet of the *Gathering Together,* the *Ta Yu* hidden in her tail, and the First World ship.

"Hail the First Worlder," said Evans.

"All hail," said the comm. "No response."

"Raise all armor, Zha."

"All armor raised," he said. "We're being targeted."

"Ninety seconds to insert," said Nance.

"Extreme evasive maneuvers—no, ignore that. Wu, can she hold in evasive?"

"Wouldn't try anything fancy."

"Evasive maneuver, slow bank, Nance. Show her our good side. Make it look sweet."

"Slow evasive maneuver. Seventy seconds to insert."

As the ships banked away from the First Worlder, it fired two blazing orbs at them, followed by another salvo of six more.

"*Under attack—*"

The salvos hit the *Gathering Together* fore and aft. Her on-board sensors darkened, the image stopped for a few seconds, then came back on, fuzzier. Numbers roared by on the read-out below the main stage as damages were tallied.

"Hit!" yelled Zha.

"Thank you for that timely information, Zha," said Evans. "Return fire, just from the *Gathering Together*. We don't want the other ship to know about the *Ta Yu*."

Feeble beams of light shot out from the *Gathering Together,* their blast barely scraping the First World ship. Again the images from the *Gathering Together* darkened, then came back on, fuzzier still—her sensors badly compromised. The remote sensors showed the comet tail from the two ships glowing brighter, with streaks of bright green plasma as the *Gathering Together*'s armor broke apart.

"Damage, Zha?"

"She's holding, but barely. One more salvo—"

"Thank you." Evans studied the image, then bit her lip. "People's Representative Wu, I request permission to sacrifice the *Gathering Together*."

"Granted," Wu said quickly.

"People's Representative Samuelson," Evans said, looking over at Nance, who nodded. Her call. "Request permission to put the *Ta Yu* in extreme

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danger."

"Granted." Phil gulped. He had given Evans the crew's consent to take action that could kill them all.

"Captain Bloom," Evans said, "ram the attacking ship. Wu, does the *Gathering Together* have jump capability?"

"Barely. It'll blow the drives, crack the hull—"

"Good. Pilot, can *you* take us into jump?"

"In, yes, Captain. Out? Both ships?"

"Just the *Gathering Together*. I don't care about her getting out. Can you pull out of Otherspace at the last minute?"

Serenit looked at the ruined wreck of the *Gathering Together,* nodded. She turned to Evans, a hard look in her eyes, a look opposite from the passive bliss Phil usually saw in pilots.

"I will return." Serenit opened her lips, her teeth tight together. "Others did not."

"Insert in twenty seconds," said Nance. "Captain Evans, I would prefer that the *Ta Yu* not go in with your ship."

"Please feel free to use the main helm and take evasive maneuvers."

"So noted. Ten seconds to insert. On your mark, then, Captain, Pilot."

"Mark."

"Mark."

"Three seconds. Two. Now." Nance tapped a control on the auxiliary helm, then rammed the *Ta Yu*'s controls all the way forward. The *Ta Yu* pulled hard up, slamming them back into their seats.

A hot-blue light lit up the image on the main stage, and then the *Gathering Together*'s view went blank. The secondary images took over, showing the *Gathering Together* glowing blue, coming down upon the First World ship as the *Ta Yu* pulled out of its comet tail. The First World ship fired all its batteries, it seemed, six, seven, ten salvos. The glowing orbs struck the *Gathering Together,* but were absorbed into that blue aura. At the last minute the First Worlder seemed to notice the *Ta Yu,* firing a shot at them that went wild. The *Gathering Together* hit the First World destroyer then, ship meeting ship, energy fields collapsing into each other.

On the *Ta Yu*'s image stage, the *Gathering Together*'s read-outs, the flickering numbers and lines, fell flat. The images from the remote sensors flickered off.

Serenit fell back into her console, eyes rolling up into her sockets, her head falling onto her neck.

"Dead," whispered Evans. "Comm, help your pilot."

Marena gave up her console, rushed over to the pilot, slapped a medical monitoring cuff on her wrist, and began shouting into her comm band. The rest of the room fell quiet.

The images from the remote sensors came back. From a dark point in their field, debris roared out in all directions, small bits of matter distinguishable as nothing more than glowing dust.

Evans reached up to wipe an eye. "Destroy remote sensors." The secondary stage images blipped out. "Disengage auxiliary helm."

"Disengaged," Nance said. The second set of controls receded back into the helm's console.

Evans stood up. "Thank you for your assistance, Ministers. Captain Bloom, you have your command back."

"Captain." Nance got up, took back the command chair.

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Serenit jerked upright up in her chair, pushing Marena and two medtechs away. "*Back,*" she said. "Black jack dead lead red we ride the wire home, gnome, all gone. Gone. Gone to sea into debris, we got 'em, madam." Serenit looked over at Evans, Nance, her face a demented mask. "Bye-bye. Ships go bye-bye."

"The First Worlder?" Nance asked.

"Dead."

"The *Gathering Together?*" Evans asked.

"Dead."

"I'm sorry, Captain," Nance said. "About your ship."

"*Ts'ui* was a good ship. Gathering Together, the Lake over Earth." Evans looked down at the hexagram patch on her chest. "The joyous over the receptive. A good ship; a good crew."

"You answered a critical question," Nance said. "Now we know. Now we know we can't go home."

"No," said Evans, looking at the pilot, eyes still roaring crazy. "No, now we know how to kill them."

Months later, further out into space, the *Ta Yu* came across the *Approach,* a deep-sleep freighter, one month's subjective time out of Kin's Star. They had hailed the freighter's computer, and it had already begun waking the crew. As Phil and Wu loaded up one of the *Ta Yu*'s lighters, he thought of the frenzied rush across the back of the Beyond. They had spent valuable weeks shuttling most of Whiskey Baker's population to the planet below, stripping the station of supplies, technology—anything to increase the poor stationers' chances of surviving on the harsh world, barely an olive-class sub-paradise.

Then they'd destroyed Whiskey Baker itself, using its main laser to launch it toward the planet's lone satellite. As the *Ta Yu* had left the system, the station had smeared itself across the tiny moon.

So it had gone: the *Ta Yu* driving at her limits, running from the First World, deeper and deeper into the Beyond. With refugees from Whiskey Baker station—those who had not wanted to stay on the planet—and the combined crews of the *Ta Yu* and the survivors of the *Gathering Together,* the decks had been almost unbearably crowded. Evans and Nance had worked out a plan. Again, Phil and Wu had to poll the crews, working toward a consensus all could agree on. They would run from the First World, run from the technology they couldn't fight without sacrificing ships. When they came to a habitable planet, volunteers would go below, taking with them whatever gear the *Ta Yu* could spare. The *Ta Yu* would keep enough crew to run the ship, so they could warn the rest of the Second World—to arm the Second World, to fight if it came to that.

Arms, Phil thought, arms factories, as he loaded the black boxes into the lighter. Arms factories. The half-meter square boxes would make plasma rifles and plasma grenades, light weapons for waging a guerrilla war. Wu helped Phil, as did Rhab, the kid from the band, and his mates—all of them would go to Kin 6.

Nance came into the lighter bay. "The *Approach* crew has woken up. They're ready for you anytime."

"Almost done here," he said. "Wu, can you finish up?" Phil walked over to Nance.

"This wasn't how I thought it would end," she said.

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"Nobody thought it would end this way. You could come with me. Evans could take command."

She shook her head. "It's my ship. I have a responsibility to my crew."

"Yeah." Phil sighed. "It's kind of funny. This whole tour, this position—I rigged it so my tour would end out here anyway. When I get to the Beyond, it turns out the Soyuz doesn't need political officers—no one to represent the interests of the masses. No Soyuz, no people's representatives."

"The Soyuz still lives out here, Phil. We still need you."

"My family needs me."

"Yeah." Nance reached out a hand to him. "I need you—want to be with you."

"Don't make it hard, Nance. We talked about it."

"Your brother and sister-in-law could come with us."

"She's pregnant, you know that. A battleship is no place for a mother. They're going down to Thule. I'll be with them."

"Yeah. Just trying." She hugged him then, pulled him close. "Just when things start to happen, why do they have to end?"

"Because that's the way life is, that's all." He pushed her away enough to look into her face. "Hey, the jumps are tight enough around the Beyond, we'd be in the same general subjective time if you did a loop back through."

"If we don't see battle. If—"

"Lots of ifs. Don't count them," Phil said.

"You'd wait for me?"

"I'd be here if you came back. And you'd still have a piece of my heart. You always will."

Their comm bands chirped. "Captain, People's Representative?" Marena asked. "Time to go."

"Thank you," Nance said. She waved at the little in-system ship. "We can spare a lighter. If we come back, we're not coming into the system. You'll have to meet us out at Kin's Oort Cloud."

"Right."

"You loaded those parts? The modifications?"

"*Yes,* Nance."

"Get the *Approach* upgraded fast. It's pretty clear: the First Worlders will pick off anything near a jump, or on the edges of a system. Get to Kin as fast as you can, then salvage what you can from the *Approach,* and hide it—send the freighter out to a far moon. We have to hope the First World will leave planets alone. It's ships they're after now, even crude low-tech Second World ships, like the *Approach.*"

"A week getting up to speed and we're out of here. Believe me."

"Okay." Nance pulled him close, hugged him one last time, then stood back. "People's Lieutenant Philip Samuelson?"

"Captain Nance Bloom."

"You are relieved of duty. On behalf of the Soyuz, thank you for your service." She saluted him, the hand over heart salute of the Union.

"Captain." He saluted her back.

"The Soyuz lives," she said.

"As long as *we* live."

Wu helped Phil climb into the lighter, and she turned away before he could look back at her.

"Live long, Phil," she said quietly to herself. "May we all live long." ○

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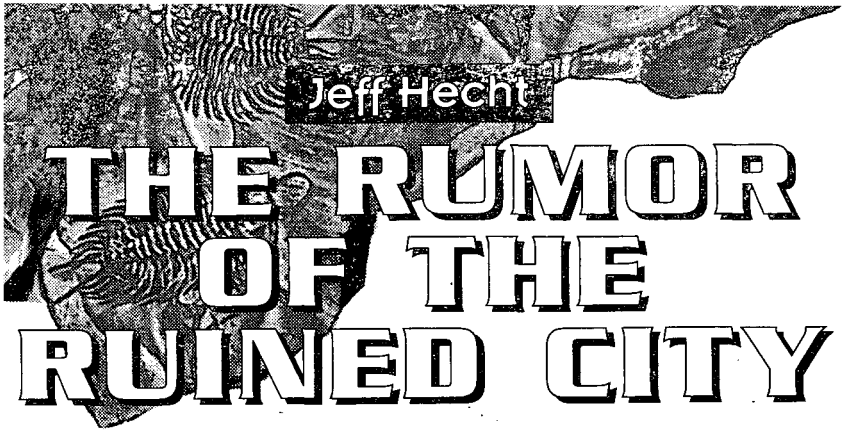

Jeff Hecht

THE RUMOR OF THE RUINED CITY

Jeff Hecht is a freelance science and technology writer and Boston correspondent for the British weekly *New Scientist*. His short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in such publications as *Analog, Interzone, Omni, Earth,* and *Laser Focus World*. His latest book, *City of Light: The Story of Fiber Optics,* is just out from Oxford University Press. Mr. Hecht holds a BS in electronic engineering from the California Institute of Technology and an M. Ed. in higher education from the University of Massachusetts. "The Rumor of the Ruined City" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

We met the mad Russian at the Pratt Museum at Amherst College. Its mounted skeletons and glass-cased models were there long before interactive displays came into fashion. Anna had smilingly promised me a serious museum when I picked her up at the Boston airport. I could have spent hours exploring it, but she insisted I follow her and the curator to the basement.

Downstairs, they opened a heavy door that led into a musty stone room full of fossils. Some were on benches as massive as the room itself; others were in cabinets or in drawers built below the work tables. Some stood on their own low stands. The stone framing of the basement and the cabinets dated from the mid-nineteenth century.

The Russian was leaning over a rock slab, peering through the sort of hand lens geologists always carry. He had been expecting us. He looked up and smiled at Anna, a gold tooth gleaming. "I am pleased to meet you, Professor Bouton." Barely over five feet, with thick white hair swept back from his forehead and a suit shiny from wear, he looked small beside sturdy Anna.

Smiling in return, Anna shook his hand. "And I am pleased to meet you, Professor Khokhlov. This is Vern Jackson, who found the site with me."

The Russian reached out to me. "I am Nikolai Khokhlov. I am pleased to meet you." Anna had told me about him on the long-distance line from her lonely Raleigh apartment. She called him "the mad Russian," for his obsession with strange old fossils that he described in rambling e-mail messages and photographed in black and white with delicate shadings. She wanted to show him what we had found in the hills of upstate New York, and it was a

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good excuse to get together again. He seemed sane enough as we shook hands. His English was accented, but clear for a man who had never visited America before.

The curator introduced us to the jewels of his basement, the fossil footprints that Professor Edward Hitchcock had collected in the nineteenth century. In 1802, a farm boy named Pliny Moody had found the first footprints on a slab of rock in a nearby town. The local wise men had said Noah's Raven made the prints, and Hitchcock himself had suspected a giant bird. "Jurassic dinosaurs, nearly two hundred million years ago," explained our tall and dignified guide. He told us so much that my mind was growing numb when he showed us a gray slab the size of a desktop crossed by tire tracks. "Here's a fossilized Cambrian tidal flat," he said with a deadpan smile.

I had learned enough geology from Anna to know the Cambrian period ended over half a billion years ago. I looked at the rock, and I looked at the curator, then I looked at Anna and the mad Russian. They seemed to be in on the game, so I hid my ignorance in a joke. "So who took the motorbike half a billion years back in the time machine?"

"Climactichnites," he chuckled. He said the fossil tracks had been a mystery for over a century. The first were found in 1860, before inflated rubber tires were invented. More were found later, but only recently did two paleontologists claim an explanation for the prints. They said a flat animal about the size of a human foot had inched its way across a tidal flat, one side pushing the other, each step raising a ridge that looked like the print of one groove in a tire. "They found one track with an impression of the animal at its end," he concluded.

The Russian looked at him with an enigmatic smile. "I am not certain. We say Problematica have as many interpretations as there are eyes."

By six o'clock, the professors had relaxed to become Anna and Nikolai, and we were on the turnpike, heading west through the Berkshires as the sun slipped down in the sky. Anna and I had talked about going back to the site alone, but taking Nikolai made it easier to justify. As I drove, she told how continental collisions, rifting, erosion, and glaciers had shaped the mountains. Geologists thought they understood that story well. Anna had not expected to stumble on a geologic enigma while repairing hiking trails on the southern fringe of the Adirondacks.

"What were you hunting?" Nikolai asked.

"Nothing in particular," Anna replied. "I always watch for fossils. Vern was looking for old settlements; his family came from near there. We both belong to a nature club that runs service trips that are partly vacations; we met up here."

"The luxury of vacations we did not have when I was young, after the war," sighed Nikolai. "We had to have a purpose. It was a field camp I had for students, when I had become a professor. Our maps showed good Cambrian and Ordovician sites. Two students came to me the second night in the field, when everyone else was sitting around the fire drinking, and said they had found some fossilized ruins. They were young, and knew little geology, but I was glad they wanted to learn, not just get drunk. I thought they had found an old mining camp or hunter's cabin, but I wanted to encourage them. I went with them early the next morning, before anyone else woke up. When they showed me, I knew they were right."

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It had been that way with us. I, the one who knew almost nothing about rocks or fossils, had stumbled upon the site as we painted red blazes on a trail. I had stopped to look out over the reservoir my mother always called "the Sacandaga," which filled the valley where my grandmother had grown up. Instead, I found a rock face with a pile of rocks embedded in it.

"It took me a day to admit that I couldn't explain what Vern had found," Anna said. "We went back after the rest of the group finished the trail work. I must have studied it for hours. . . ."

Nikolai waited until he was sure Anna had finished. "My wife tells me I am crazy to chase the rumor of the ruined city. She has never traveled far; to her, crossing the ocean is like flying to another planet. She says at our age we should be thinking of retiring and playing with our grandchildren. She will not go to see it, so it cannot seize her like it did me. When I saw it I knew it was my destiny."

"I understand," said Anna. "Sometimes I worry about that, too."

We stopped for a quick roadside meal when we got off the Thruway in New York. Anna and I quietly paid for Nikolai, knowing Russian scientists have no money. He had pulled strings to get speaking invitations to Yale and Amherst, which had paid for his trip to the States. It was after dusk when we set up my big old tent in the Northville campground, just inside Adirondack State Park. As Anna and I worked, Nikolai opened his bag and unwrapped two small thin slabs of dark fine shale that he had packed with tissue in a book-sized box. We set up the lantern and looked at the fossils, glossy black films on the gray rock.

Anna studied them, turning the slabs to catch the surface in different light, peering at spots through her hand lens. To me they were overgrown insects with too many legs, claws, and body parts. "What do you think they are?" she asked.

"Enigmatica," he replied. "I have studied papers on the Burgess Shale and other lagerstätten, but even those lucky events that preserved so many other strange things captured nothing like them." He took them and packed them carefully away. "There are bigger ones, but I could not bring them."

In the morning, we drove to the trail head and slipped on our day packs. When Anna and I had discovered the site, the whole trail crew had backpacked in, but we didn't want to make Nikolai carry a heavy overnight pack.

We walked about two miles along the trail still marked by our red blazes, then turned at the old stone wall that I had spotted last summer. We followed the wall to the cellar hole that was our landmark. The remains of the old building intrigued Nikolai. "How long has it been abandoned?"

"The trees are at least fifty years old," Anna replied. We'd puzzled over this ourselves, when we first saw it and wondered what life had been like deep in the woods long ago. "The loose fieldstone looks like early nineteenth century work. I'd guess the people moved out between 1900 and 1940."

"We never found any signs of plumbing," I added, though I was not sure what that would mean to him.

Nikolai sat on a big rock at one corner, sipping from his water bottle and looking down into the hole. Leaves were slowly filling it in. "Could this be what you found?"

I shook my head. "No, it's several hundred feet away."

"That isn't what he meant, Vern. He's asking if it could be the basement

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of an old house." Anna shrugged. "We're not sure. We only discovered this last year, and haven't studied it long enough. Although we've talked about it forever on the phone." She smiled, then added, "But the rocks aren't terrestrial sediments. They're marine shales."

"Mine is shallow marine to mud flat," said Nikolai. "We found one surface that looked like the Climactichnites layer, but without animal imprints or tire tracks. I wish we had something like that. We need more pieces of the puzzle." He pushed himself up, and it was time to move on.

Our enigma is in a rock face that looks south toward the lake. Anna says glaciers exposed it when they pushed south tens of thousands of years ago. The thick ice sheets thrust over the mountains, breaking off big chunks, and leaving steep rocky slopes on the southern sides. I saw the same thing in Maine when I was camping with my family.

Nikolai saw it as soon as we came through the trees. He exclaimed something in Russian, then strode to the rock face. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and studied the rock through the little hand lens that hung on a cord tied around his neck. Then he shifted his gaze to the lighter rocks embedded in the dark gray shale. Three roughly squared stones sat on top of each other, the top one just above his eye level. He examined the lighter rock, then peered intently through the hand lens at the edge touching the dark rock. We watched as he ran his finger along the joint, then pulled a little jackknife from his pocket and poked at it.

"Incredible. They are held as firmly in the matrix as glacial dropstones are in marine sediment. If they were not square stones set on top of each other, I would think they sank to the bottom from a melting iceberg."

"North America was on the Cambrian equator, Nikolai. I don't know of any Cambrian ice age," said Anna. I had heard it before, as Anna and I had debated how the rocks had come to be there. She had scoffed when I suggested someone piled them together, but she could find no other explanation. Trying to solve the mystery of the rocks was the first excuse for our calls; we found others as the weeks passed.

"You could make the rocks go away, if you want. Just ignore them. Mikornin did that. I told him where to look, and I know he went there, but he could not see them. He is a fool, Mikornin."

Anna nodded. She had told me about Alexei Mikornin, late one night when she felt down and we were reaching out to each other on the phone. He was a bright young geologist with a solid reputation, pulling contacts to get a job in Anna's department and get out of Russia. Mikornin was no fool; he would not waste his time on discoveries no one would believe. Anna worried someone like him would get tenure instead of her.

She traced her fingers over the border of the embedded rock, as I had done when I found it.

"Do you have anything else?" Nikolai asked.

"No fossils like yours," Anna said. "We found three other squared rocks near here, but they are separate."

"Like the wall fell down before it was buried?"

"Yes."

"Have you tried digging any of them out?"

"Would you believe us if we had?"

Nikolai laughed. "Would anyone believe any of us?" He turned from the rock face, looking back and forth between us. "If you did not see this, and I

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only told you, would you believe this? Science says this cannot happen. Science says nothing that lived on Earth five hundred million years ago could have built walls or cities. Who carved the rocks? Trilobites with their many little legs? Hallucogenia or Anomalocaris from the Burgess Shale? All just overgrown insects or crabs. It is impossible."

Anna looked at him, puzzled. "Do you believe that?"

Nikolai grinned, light glinting from his gold tooth. "Of course not! I believe my eyes. I believe ground truth. I know what I see here. I know what I saw in Siberia. Something cut rocks and set them on top of each other. These are not tire tracks that somebody can invent an animal like Climactichnites to explain." It was not exactly madness that glinted in his eyes, but the manic energy that had pushed him up the hill. "How long have you worked here?"

"Only three days," Anna sighed. "After we found it, we camped nearby and stayed for two extra days. We searched for other exposures, but this is the best. We didn't disturb it. We didn't have park permits, and besides, as you say, no one would believe us."

"No one will believe us, anyway. They are not ready to believe." He turned to me, asking "Am I not correct, Vern? You engineers know scientists."

I nodded. I had learned a lot about Anna after the discovery, as we talked for hours under the stars near her cramped little tent. She is not the most cautious of paleontologists. She knows some who still doubt that an asteroid impact killed the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago, despite the hole as big as Connecticut it made in Mexico. We had much less evidence, and saying something smart enough to pile rocks on top of each other lived half a billion years ago required a new scientific revolution. Sometimes Anna wanted to forget it.

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"Dig," said Nikolai, setting down his pack. From its back pocket he took his geologist's hammer, pointed at one end, square at the other. He must have read the uneasiness on Anna's face, because he quickly added, "carefully, of course." He put on worn plastic goggles, then whacked the rock. Chips flew.

We chipped at the rock face for hours, with little reward. Anna and Nikolai peered at the fragments through their hand lenses. They found only bits of trilobite, and a few tiny brachiopod shells. I chipped away shale, and found the edge of the pale rock was as smooth as it had looked on the surface.

"Whoever stacked these rocks spent more time working them than the people who left the cellar hole," I told Anna as we hiked back. "Those were just undressed fieldstone. This looks carved."

She looked distressed, a thirty-six-year-old assistant professor fascinated by something that wouldn't yield the publications she needed for tenure.

Nikolai didn't notice her expression. "It probably was," he said. "But I wonder how soft-bodied animals could have done it."

Anna fired up the gasoline stove while I chopped vegetables for a stew. Nikolai sat by the lantern, comparing rock fragments with photographs from his bag. When everything was in the pot and simmering, we sat with him.

"Half a billion years, it has been there. It is incredible, is it not?"

I nodded, but I would have done so before we found the ruined city. I think my family is old because some ancestor fought in the Battle of

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Saratoga, 220 years ago. That was as far back as I had expected to look when Anna and I set down our buckets of red paint to walk along the old stone wall.

He pulled a small box from his bag and opened it. "I brought some index fossils from my deposits." I had to look carefully to see the trilobite outlined in one rock. Anna examined each sample with the metal-cased hand lens that she wore between her breasts on a leather thong.

"I can't place any of these, Nikolai, but I haven't found anything good for dating here." Anna paused. "Maybe tomorrow."

I must have looked puzzled to the Russian. "Do you understand what we do, Vern? If our index fossils match, it means your ruined city was built at the same time as mine."

"The same geological time, Nikolai," Anna added.

"Ah, yes. Within a million years or two." He grinned, showing his gold tooth in the lantern light. I walked back to check the stew, wondering if Homo Erectus had tamed fire a million years ago.

On the third day, we moved to the other rock face which showed squared stones embedded in the shale. We had little luck until Anna spotted a big rock that had fallen from the rock face, with its top layer separating like veneer from ruined plywood. A thin sheet four feet long and almost three feet wide came loose easily when I jammed a branch underneath and pried. Nikolai helped Anna slide the top piece to the ground, exposing the fresh surface.

Shiny black ridges caught my eye at once. Anna gasped in surprise. Nikolai muttered something in Russian.

"What is it?" I asked.

Neither said a word as they stared at the fossil. To me, it was just part of another unknown animal, perhaps as big as a bear or crocodile when it lived, but with many legs and a body divided into segments like a lobster's tail. I could not read much from the rock, but I could read the mixture of excitement and distress on their faces. "It isn't supposed to be here, is it?"

Anna looked at Nikolai, eyes wide. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Not this size." His voice was hollow. "Could it be an anomalocarid or proto-eurypterid?" He shook his head, answering his own question.

I could see claws and legs where Anna and Nikolai pointed to them. One had four toes spread out at the end; another showed three toes. Each leg was a couple of inches wide, and I could see half a dozen legs clearly on one side where the legs were intact. The legs might have kept on going, but the rock had broken in the middle of the fossil.

"Look at the eyes," Nikolai half-whispered. Four of them, big and multifaceted, looked toward each point of the compass from the top of a head the size of a dinner plate.

"It's incredible. Where could it fit, Nikolai?"

They muttered uncertain words back and forth, looking at the thing from different angles. It seemed obvious to me. "It came from the ruined city. It probably built it."

Anna's face turned to me, framed by unkempt brown hair. "Yes, but what is it? What did it evolve from? Where does it fit on the evolutionary tree of life? This thing lived no more than thirty million years after the start of the Cambrian explosion. That was the first group of large complex animals.

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How could something like this have evolved so fast? Where did it come from?" She turned back to Nikolai, and I realized I was out of my depth. "What can we do?" she asked him.

I looked at the mad Russian, and saw a tired, puzzled old man, unsure of himself in a strange place. The late afternoon sun wrote shadow-lines across his face. "I wish I knew," he said, slumping to sit beside the split rock.

"Could it fit with your site?"

The Russian shrugged. "The rocks would fit. But everyone back in Russia laughed at the rocks. We have some strange little fossils; I showed you two. I have a photo in my bag that looks like the four fingers on the hand, but smaller and all by itself. The bigger ones are not well-preserved. I gave up showing them everything." His eyes closed, sighing deeply. "We had only the rumor of the ruined city. Just a rumor. You have the skeleton of an inhabitant."

Anna looked overwhelmed, as she had last year after we had talked most of the night, talking about our discovery and sharing our lives. "They won't believe it, Nikolai. They'll laugh at me, and leave me to wither into a lonely old woman."

I didn't want to think of her as lonely. They would have stared at the fossil all evening, if I had not warned them of the time. The slab was too heavy for us to carry. Anna and I worried about Nikolai, he worried about Anna, and I couldn't lift the big rock alone. We'd have to come back with help or equipment to carry it out.

We sat around the weathered wooden picnic table talking late into the night. While I brewed coffee on the camp stove, Nikolai explained what he had found in Russia. I sat beside Anna as he sketched the layering of his rock formations on the pages of a notebook. The features he saw were subtle. I asked a few questions; Anna asked many more. Nikolai's answers sounded as if he had heard most of our questions before.

It was all magic to me. As an engineer, I build optical instruments; it takes a geologist to read the rocks' stories. Nikolai thought his ruins had been a wall, built of stones neatly cut and laid on the mud flat so they fit closely together. "It may have been more a town than a city, but it was in the water. I think they lived in the sea."

Anna nodded as he said his site had been just south of the equator half a billion years ago; so had New York. But I could see her grow uneasy as he sketched a town built in the waters of a tropical sea. Years of graduate school had taught Anna not to speculate wildly beyond the evidence. More than once she had warned me not to take crazy ideas too seriously. Yet there we sat, watching the mad Russian build a few odd stones into a city built by some long-vanished creatures alien to all the science we knew. "How can you read something so fantastic into the rocks?" she asked when he paused for breath.

"It is forty years I have been a geologist. I know patterns of the Earth like you know Cambrian index fossils. Come see them and you will understand. When I stand before the rocks, I can see the ruined city as clearly as I can see that you are lovers."

I don't know if Anna or I were more startled. We had tried to keep it all proper and under control, not even holding hands. How could he see the hours on the phone, and the thoughts lurking in the back of our minds?

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How could he have heard us planning the trip to leave time "just to ourselves"? I felt myself blush. "What?" we both said.

Nikolai's mouth formed a conspiratorial grin. "You say it in the way you look at each other. You cannot hide that."

Anna recovered first. "No, Nikolai. He is married and has children." Even in the lantern light, I could see her blushing.

"There are no secrets among those who can read rocks," Nikolai laughed. "I can read you both. He is in love with you and you are in love with him." He paused. "I will not tell your wife, Vern."

"You don't understand," I sputtered, grasping for excuses. "We are just friends."

I couldn't read Nikolai well; it was dark, and my eyes were cloudy. He did not want to hear our protests. Perhaps he had grown used to lies in the old Soviet Union. He stood and shrugged, and said, "I will go sleep in the car, so you can sleep together."

We did not stop him from carrying his sleeping bag from the tent. As he walked to the car, we looked at each other across the picnic table in the lantern light, neither moving. The night before I had dreamed of holding Anna, of exploring her and exploring with her. Now I was a kid caught playing with fire and doused with cold water to put out the flames.

Anna touched my hand, and I held hers. We heard Nikolai close the car door behind himself, and listened to night sounds of the forest. The few others in the campground seemed to be asleep. The stars moved. "Maybe you were right," I whispered across the table. "Maybe he is crazy."

Anna smiled. "He is not the only one."

I savored the time as the stars crept further across the sky. "I can't," I whispered at last.

"Nor I," she replied, letting go my hand. We went quietly into the tent, to crawl into our separate sleeping bags and dream our separate dreams of the ruined city.

Clouds partly covered the sky when we rose for an early breakfast; the radio forecast steady rain for the afternoon and evening. We would have liked better weather, but we had done well that far, and Nikolai had to leave the next day.

We hiked to the site, but in the sober light of that cloudy morning, it was clear the slab was too big to carry. Anna wouldn't risk cutting it with the equipment we had. We collected other samples, fragmentary fossils that might be distantly related to the big one, but didn't examine them closely. We photographed the fossil on the slab, and protected it as best we could from the elements. We could come back for it later with a bigger crew, the right equipment, and a permit from the park authority.

The rains came soon after lunchtime, and we slogged through the wet forest in plastic rain gear, looking in vain for more signs of the ruined city. We stayed too long, and the walk back did not go well in the heavy rain. Nikolai had pushed himself too hard. He complained little, but we could tell his knees and back hurt.

At camp, we spread a tarp to keep the rain off the stove. While I cooked, they compared rocks, tilting them to catch the lantern light.

Over the meal, I asked what stories the new rocks told.

"Nothing more. That animal might as well have come from another planet," Anna said.

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"Why couldn't it?" One visit in half a billion years made sense to me.

Anna gave me a disappointed teacher face, but Nikolai disagreed. "Do not dismiss that idea too fast, Anna. Look at all the planets the astronomers have found around other stars. Mars may have had life once, and that would have been a short trip."

"No, Nikolai, that's much worse," she said. "A few paleontologists might believe an animal that evolved from the anomalocarids. That's vaguely within their concept of reality. But they would laugh at extraterrestrials. You can't tell them too many things they don't want to believe."

The Russian sighed. "Why is it worse? We do not have to change all of evolution if our creature came from another planet. It is early yet. We have many questions to ask and much to learn. From where did it come? How did it build?"

"I don't know," Anna said, studying the scarred table. "I don't know. I wanted something easier."

"Nothing big is easy." Nikolai sipped water from his cup; rain dripped from the tarp. "They did not want to believe in asteroid impacts or plate tectonics, either."

We were too tired to argue. Nikolai, exhausted, went back to the car soon after dinner, saying nothing more about rocks or love. As we lay in the tent listening to the rain Anna worried again that we should have kept our discovery to ourselves. "I'm not ready for this, Vern. I want to do the right thing, but I don't know what's right. I know it's wrong to suppress evidence, but it's wrong to make wild claims without any support. It would have been simpler if just you and I had come here and worked on this at our own speed."

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know what I had really wanted. "I try to do the right thing, but it isn't easy to tell what that is."

"Isn't it easier to be an engineer, where the numbers give you clear and clean answers?"

I started to tell her about the judgment calls you have to make in cost-performance tradeoffs, but we both drifted to sleep before I could explain that engineering is as uncertain as life.

Anna and Nikolai discussed what they should do over breakfast, as drizzle fell around the tarp. Nikolai already had drafted a paper on his ruined city; he wanted to add our find to his and make Anna a co-author. "You can be first," he offered with a broad sweep of his right hand. "I will not say they were extraterrestrials. But it is time to publish. I am an old man, and I have already waited too long. I want answers in my lifetime. Visit my site; my rocks will convert you to the truth."

"We don't have an answer yet," Anna warned. "We may never have an answer," she whispered to me later, not wanting to wound the old Russian. Cautious Anna wanted to wait and do more research. She had to organize students to haul the big slab out of the woods and look for other fossils. She wanted our fossil examined by experts on anomalocarids and eurypterids, the many-legged animals she thought might be related to it. She had to juggle her time to make the Russian trip before her fall classes started. And she wanted time to think, to decide if she could face the inevitable battles with other scientists who would not believe the rocks.

I went inside the tent and packed our gear. After a long debate, they compromised on a three-month wait.

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"What do you think it is?" Nikolai asked me as we loaded our gear into the car.

"I have no more idea than Pliny Moody did when he found those old footprints," I answered, wondering what the boy would have thought of dinosaurs.

Nikolai laughed and unzipped a side pocket of his pack. "This is for you," he said, handing me a cardboard-backed envelope with Russian writing on the outside. "It is a picture of another thing from my ruined city. Do not show it to Anna; she will not believe until she sees it."

We talked of the future and the past on the way back to Boston. Nikolai was planning for retirement, unsure how he would fare in changing Russia. Anna had a grant application pending, as well as her worries about tenure. I had a big new microscope project coming up. And we all wondered what could have happened half a billion years ago.

Nikolai's flight was first, so we dropped him off at the international terminal. He hugged us both and kissed Anna on the cheek before gathering his luggage to walk through the glass doors.

I drove back around the airport loop to drop off Anna. "I wonder what he saw?" she mused as we got out of the car in front of her terminal.

"The sort of thing you see in the rocks that I don't understand."

"There are many things I don't understand myself," she said, looking deep into my eyes. She reached out her arms and we hugged tightly. "You did the right thing."

"I try," I said. "You're doing the right thing, too."

"It isn't easy. Sometimes I'd just like to run away from it all. But we can't really do that."

I agreed, and we let each other go. We kissed each other chastely on the cheeks. She gathered her things, and waved a broad farewell before she went inside.

Suzanne was waiting for me at home. "I knew you'd be getting home now," she greeted me, as glad to see me as I was to see her. There was nothing chaste about our kisses. As we brought my gear inside, I remembered Nikolai's envelope. I told Suzanne that the mad Russian had given me something mysterious, and handed it to her unopened. She pulled out a black and white photo, and examined it carefully. "Footprints," she said, returning it to me. "Somebody rode an all-terrain vehicle in the mud, got off, and walked around before riding away."

I looked at the photo. A pair of tread marks crossed the picture, spaced evenly like the wheels on a Jeep or ATV. No pair of Climactichnites could have marched along so uniformly. At the top, the path curved and the tracks doubled, showing all four wheels. Each tread was deeper in two spots, as if the vehicle had stopped. There, on opposite sides of the tracks, were prints from small, odd-shaped waffle-soled hiking boots, the sort that the animal we found might have worn. Someone had gotten out and walked across the wet mud. They had bent over to write curled, Arabic-looking letters with a sharp finger before climbing back into the vehicle and riding away. I had seen a kid on an ATV do the same thing on a beach. But this mud had dried long, long ago, before Nikolai had found it and neatly painted letters on the rock with a fine brush. Most of the words were Russian, but the last two were in English: "Latest Cambrian." ❍

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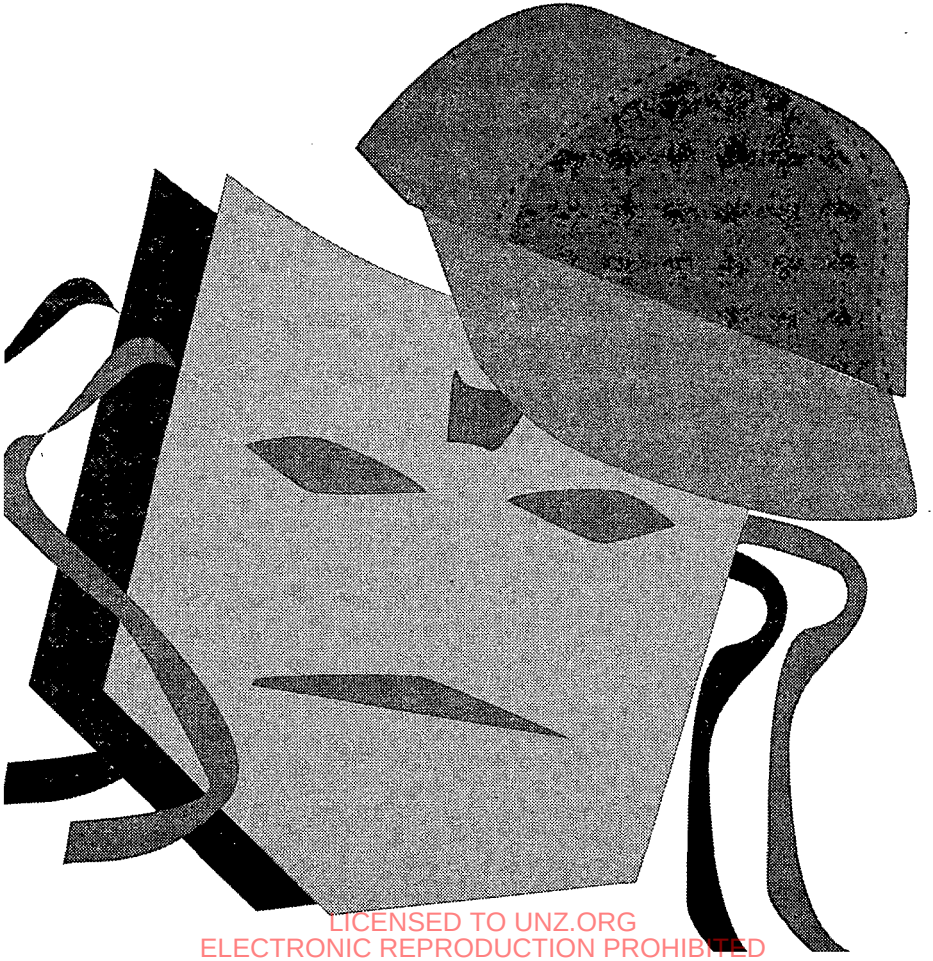
Eliot Fintushel

IZ AND THE BLUE GOD

Only our bizarre friend Iz, last seen in "Izzy and the Hypocrite Lecteur" (2/98), could find Krishna in the washroom of the Ragini Spaghetti Factory . . .

Illustration by Shirley Chan



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In mating with heaven,
Can you play the female part?
—Lao Tze

-1-

"Delilah!" Iz wore his Rochester Red Wings baseball cap with the visor down over his forehead to conceal his bisected brow.

Ah, the famous brow, single and thick, like a sandbar across his forehead! Many an alien vessel had run aground on Izzy's brow. The mind eaters of Xesis had gotten lost in Iz's furrow and headed for galaxies with simpler fare. Brkjss and the Unlimited Ones, who slipped into the human landscape through the fourth beat of the word "blue" in Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet," got blown back out when Izzy screwed up his eyes.

"Fay always *said* she wanted to shave it down the middle," he groused. He pulled his seat belt tighter as Sarvaduhka floored it to pass a stopped school bus. "Said I wasn't *front office* with that palisade of mine."

"Oh, Iz, it was an accident, one hundred percent. And the guys at Dependable Temps, they love you, fella. They were just trying to get the rise out of you with your new look."

"New look!" Izzy rubbed the spot over his nose that used to be the middle of his brow. It was still greasy from Fay's Vaseline—the "separating agent"—and gritty from the Plaster of Paris. She had slathered it all over that winsome puss of his. For all his bellyaching, Iz liked it. It was like being petted, like being a baby in the bassinet with Mama cooing over you. He could almost settle for that! Ah, Fay! "Fay reads a magazine article, and suddenly I'm getting a *life mask. You* try wearing twenty-five pounds of plaster for half an hour. See if it improves *your* love life!"

"I have no love life! Still no action with the wife, ey?"

"She's turned celibate on me, Duke. It's like she's forgot who I am! Nooky's at an all-time low. . . . Say, that wasn't your jar of Vaseline, was it?"

Sarvaduhka had been known, in his constant pursuit of "female action," to sometimes make do with a liberal mix of rhythmic friction and imagination, and none too privately. Iz would hear him singing in the bathroom in wavering Arabian modes—and, yes, Fay's *Vogue* would be missing.

"Number Two, Savvy! Let me in, let me in! The pressure is building! Your hourglass is emptying! *Aunty Em! Aunty Em!*"

"Just a minute, Izzy, can't you?" Sarvaduhka gargled. Iz pounded on the door. Finally, Sarvaduhka hit a cadence at the end of his accelerando. The door opened. He was buckling his belt.

"Who *are* you when you do that?" Izzy had to know. He said it with admiration, actually. "I never heard of anybody singing when they do it."

"In 1978," said Sarvaduhka, "I went to see an old Hindi movie called *Satyam Hivam Sundaram. Love Sublime!* For the first time in my life, Izzy, I am seeing kissing in a movie in India! The star was a guy name of Munir Burman, I think. He had attractive mustaches and thick hair, not just on his head, but all over his tight little body, just like me. He sang beautifully, although these things are always dubbed. Ever since then, when I fornicate—even solo—I am the Munir Burman.

"There was one scene, Izzy, where Munir is chasing his girlfriend around

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a tree. Suddenly it rains. Her sari is soaked. Oh, Izzy, you could see everything, cleavage, nipples, whatever you like! Wet sari is very much superior to naked, in my estimation. *Vogue* is not so bad though, especially this Rachel Williams person."

"I seen that movie, Sava—I don't recall if it was through my own eyes or somebody else's. Just when it got good, they cut to a cross-section of a V8 engine dieseling. Bush league stuff. Do you imagine that cloudburst when you flush, or what?"

"Exactly, Izzy! Exactly!"

"Ain't you ashamed?"

"Not at all! Here's Fay's *Vogue*."

"It's greasy."

Sarvaduhka sped along at fifty through early morning traffic, doing his favorite maneuver: whenever he came to a red light, he turned right, then did a quick U-turn and another right, to cheat his way past it, three or four seconds to the good. He laughed triumphantly and gave the wheel of his rotting VW Squareback a congratulatory slap. He did it all with one hand—and that included the rope-operated, jerry-rigged clutch pedal—since, with the other hand, he had to play *Vraja-lila;* he had balanced his laptop on the dash just under his soapstone Ganesha incense pot and plugged it into the cigarette lighter. BOOP! SKWONK! "Second level! Second level!" It was a new platform game. He had downloaded it from the Internet at no cost beyond normal hookup time.

"You missed the turn for Ragini."

With a chassis-shattering jump over the median, Sarvaduhka corrected their course. "Are you believing your eyebrow is a psychic antenna, Izzy? Do you think you are finished with hearing alien transmissions and other *pup'hula* because of this?"

"Yeah, just before Fay and Willy yanked the mold off, I was listening to an interstellar freighter humming through the Oort cloud, way out at the edge of the Milky Way. You'd have loved it, Sarvi! I could feel the heaving of the Cytherian lackeys—they fuel the thing through the thrust of their ejaculations. Them dookils were baying in steerage too; each one of *them* is worth an Earth or two to the Magellanics, the guys that ordered them from the traders whose ship it was. I could hear them reckoning debits and credits in the forecastle, drinking vintage zoot-rot, and laughing—hideous! Like echoing upchuck.

"I was starting to get something else too—is there a place called Vrndavana, Sarvi?"

"In Bengal, I think so."

"I was starting to get something about that. Then off comes the mold with a piece of my antenna, and everything goes dead!"

Sarvaduhka took his hand off the space bar for one second to downshift to Neutral. He liked to go as fast as he could in a high gear and then see how far he could coast. "Do you want to know what I think, Izzy?"

"No."

"Good riddance! *That's* what I think. Now you can be a normal human being like myself. . . . Oh! Oh! One more tryst to *third* level! I just have to sneak this note past my husband to Krishna—for Radha, of course, not for *me,* for heaven's sake—and that will make five, and I go to the *third* level! Not even my smart-ass Fortune 500 cousin has done like this, Izzy. . . !"

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"Lemme out. Here's Ragini. Thanks for the ride."

Iz got out and watched Sarvaduhka roar away. The squareback zigzagged down the street like a bumper bowling ball. Off to the Lucky Three, no doubt, to clean out the cash register and make sure that the new girl, a relative from Bombay, was tidying the rooms properly!

Iz looked at the pasta factory and had to blink. On either side of the main entrance there was now a stout pillar with chubby deities entwined in deeply intimate postures. As Iz came nearer he realized a more disturbing fact—they weren't actually pillars at all but expert paintings: trompe l'oeil. He passed between them, between those things that were not really there, that were not actually stone lingams with fornicating yogins, but flat masses of pigment. In a minute, he was in Mr. Comisetti's outer office, knocking on the boss's door.

"Who the hell is it and waddaya want?"

"It's Izzy Molson from Dependable Temps. Jeez, what, did you miss your coffee this morning, Comisetti?"

"Get your ass in here, Molson."

Izzy opened the door, and Comisetti practically hugged him. He was a head taller than Izzy, gaunt, with a moon-shaped face, jutting at the chin and forehead, and with a crater below the lip so big that if his auburn toupee ever slipped down over his face, you would think it was the nape of his neck. White short-sleeves. Black tie. "I only thank God, Izzy, that you ain't one of them Harvard queens the big boys are stuffing down my throat."

"Harvard queens?" Izzy sat down in front of Comisetti's desk where the tall man pointed. Comisetti sat down on *his* side of the desk, and Izzy took a look around. It had been nearly a year since Iz was here, between working for Sarvaduhka at the Lucky Three and the job he just lost at Gordon's Tool and Die. Every now and again, Dependable shunted him over to Ragini, if he arrived at the Temp Office too late for the sweetheart bulk truck jobs (half a day's work hauling garbage—for a full day's pay) or if the guy in the window didn't know him.

Comisetti had redecorated, so to speak. There were religious articles all over the place. The Stations of the Cross were plastered along the walls—looked like pictures torn from a Sunday School book. Comisetti's wall calendar, a complimentary item from Julian's Meat Market ("*Every Cut A Cut Above!*") with red Sundays *sans serif,* had a gruesome, bloody crucifixion over the current month. Center stage on Comisetti's desk, a Sears Panasonic cassette recorder was playing Palestrina's arrangement of *Stabat Mater.*

Eja, mater, fons amoris,
Me sentire vim doloris
Fac, ut tecum lugeam.

Fac ut ardeat cor meum
In amando Christum Deum,
Ut sibi complaceam.

Izzy whistled. "Hey, what is all this, Comisetti? Is this Passion week, or have you just seen the light?"

Comisetti shook his head. "You ain't seen none of the new guys yet, huh?

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I bet you seen them columns though, them nasty columns by the front. I'm telling you, Izzy, I wouldn't feed my family no noodles that come out between them nasty things.

"Listen,"—leaning over the desk toward Izzy, wafting Old Salt and rum—"no love is lost between you and me, as we both of us understand, Iz; however, as between them *Gaudeamus Igiturs* and you . . ."

"*Gaudeamus Igiturs?*"

"The Harvard guys, dammit! What are we talking about here? Couple of weeks ago the suits tell me, hey, we got these fifteen, sixteen Harvard guys got applications in for the canning line, the big man's son is a Harvard guy, and so he wants as how we gotta take them all on." Comisetti pulled open a file drawer, whipped out a completed application form and threw it down in front of Izzy.

"Comisetti, you moron, this don't say '*Gaudeamus igitur*'; it says '*Gaudiya Vaisnava.*'"

"Whatever! Goddam bilingualism, is what that is. It don't say 'Ragini' here either—it says '*Raganuga*' something. Who cares?" Comisetti tore the thing out of Izzy's hand and squashed it back into the file drawer. "The suits said Harvard, so it's Harvard. '*Gaudeamus igitur iuvenes cum summus.*' That's the Harvard song, right?"

"Jeez, the crap they teach you in Sunday school!"

"Izzy, these *Raganuga Gaudeamus* clowns are all over me. This stuff,"—pointing to the pictures on the wall, to the calendar, to the cassette player—"this is all for protection. You have no idea, Izzy! And Izzy . . ."

"Yeah?"

"*They're* the ones who had Dependable send you over."

"The *Gaudeamus* guys? How could *they* do that? Comisetti, what are you handing me here?"

"I'm telling you, Iz, they got *pull!* And they wanted you special. *You!* Will you watch them for me, Izzy? Will you tell me what the hell is going on? I'm going nuts here!"

"Jeez, what can *I* do?"

"Just keep your eyes open, is all I'm asking. There's gotta be something illegal going on here. This ain't right, Iz. Mother of God, just wait till you see!"

"Whatever you say, Comisetti! Hey, how about my papers? Ain't you gotta sign me in?"

"Forget it. I'll take care of it. Get out of here. Go find the Preacher for what to do. . . . Wait a minute—something's different about you! You get a nose job or something?"

"That's it."

"Waste of dough!" Comisetti shook his head.

Sancta mater, istud agas,
Crudifixi figi plagas,
Cordi meo valide.

Tu nati vulnerati,
Tam dignati prome pati,
Poenas mecum divide.

"Gimme my half dollar back, you tight-assed bourgeois devil dingus!"

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Preacher was out in the foyer banging on a candy machine. Preacher was five-foot-six, with elevator thoughts that raised him to five eleven and a half. He sported red trousers and a cabby's hat. He had a Lenin-style goatee and a purple burn mark covering the right side of his face. He was barefoot, and the one time he *kneed* the machine, Izzy could see that the soles of his feet had been painted red.

"Hey, Preach!"

"Iz!" Preacher flashed Izzy a little smile, then went back to pounding the machine. "They get you coming and going, the bastards!"

"Ain't it the truth! What's the story on the red feet? Isn't that against Health Code?"

"Health Code, Shmealth Code! The new guys have got everybody on the floor doing it. Brilliant huh? Stickin' it to those fat-assed bosses, brother!"

Preacher started to sing:

The People's feet are brightest red,
Her banner shrouds our martyr dead. . . !

"Hey, Comisetti sez show me . . ."

"*Screw* Comisetti, Iz! His days are numbered. I got me some new comrades here gonna show him which end is up."

"You mean the Harvard guys?"

Preacher gave the candy machine one last slam, then left it to face Izzy. "What Harvard guys? I'm talking about the *Gaudiya Vaisnavas,* the Bengali guys, the *Raganuga Bhakti Sadhanas."*

"*Raganuga. . . ?"*

"I dunno—I think it's Bengali for *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat.* Anyways, I'm organizing 'em, Iz. I'm putting them in the picture, *chez* America, you know what I'm saying? I'm talking, and they're listening. I sold those fellows fifteen of my *Das Kapitals* out the back of my Pontiac, brother."

"The ones you bought up from Lost Freight, the ones with the pages you have to slice apart, the ones in German with the interlinear translations into Albanian?"

"That's the ones. I'm telling you, these guys are smart cookies, Iz. They know the score. . . . Did you punch in yet?"

"No."

"Hey, what's different about you? You get coifed or something?"

"That's it."

"Well, come on, for crissakes—you should be getting paid for this here!"

The face on the punch clock had changed. It wasn't hours and minutes any more. "It's *muhurtas,"* Preacher explained. "I'm telling you, Iz, when these Bengalis talk, the suits listen, and ever since they got here, they been stuffing the suggestion box, brother. The bosses are running scared. We got thirty *muhurtas* here, each one of them forty-eight minutes long, and you get paid for them just like for an hour. Is that a sweetheart of a deal, or what?"

Izzy squinted at the thing. It was like an ancient illuminated calendar, the Book of Days. In addition to the *muhurtas* business, the clock face was divided into eight "watches," each with a different thematic illustration. At the top was a moonlit forest with two tiny figures, one of which was blue, and the other of which had boobs. The little man and woman were running

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in opposite directions from a pile of leaves that seemed to have been their love bower. At the bottom (formerly six o'clock) the blue guy and his girlfriend were together again, swimming in a pond while servant girls giggled in the bushes. In-between, you had your cow-milking, your bath-taking, your sun-worshipping, your passing of love-notes, and so on. Pretty straightforward, thought Iz, but somewhat lacking in the bottling, capping, and stacking department for a place like Ragini's.

He scribbled his stats on a blank card, hoped that was kosher, and slipped it into the machine. It came out with a number and "FIX YOUR MIND ON *ME*."

" 'Fix your mind on *me*? ' " Izzy cocked his head at Preacher.

"Come on, I'll give you what to do. How's the back?"

"A granite pillar."

"Don't worry. You won't be lifting no skids."

While Izzy followed Preacher through the double doors into the deafening clatter of the canning line, Fay was sitting at the kitchen table staring at a piece of his eyebrow. There were also one or two eyelash hairs and some sideburn fuzz embedded in the plaster. She accidentally spilled a drop of her coffee in the hollow of Izzy's nose, so to speak, still slick with Vaseline. She mopped it up with the corner of a paper napkin.

When Fay tilted the mold toward the light *just so,* all the *ins* looked like *outs,* and it created the optical illusion of Izzy's head sitting in the hollow, blanched but 3-D. Except for that bit of brow! Iz hadn't gotten any "reception" last night, but maybe it was nothing. Iz's mind was a leaky faucet, anyway; he never knew what would come in or when. Sometimes things came to him during traction, as they yanked the bad back straight with pulleys in the bathroom doorway; sometimes things came during lovemaking . . .

Fay sighed. There had been no lovemaking lately. She stroked the inside of Izzy's cheek, his eyes, his lips. It wasn't that she didn't love him. She was just experiencing low libido, was all. Maybe it was cyclical. Or maybe, after all these years, she was realizing that they were not such a great match after all.

Psychology This Week had said the Life Mask Experience could be bonding.

On the table nearby were the paste and the newspaper and a blow dryer to speed things along. What if that piece of eyebrow came off the plaster into the papier mâché? Suppose it were a crucial piece of Iz's psychic antenna after all, as Hamisch always said? Suppose you could put on Izzy's mask and catch the scuttlebutt from all over the galaxy?

She started ripping newspaper and soaking it in the kitchen sink—no good to use scissors; clean edges would be too hard to blend—*like me and Iz in bed these days.* She mixed up the wallpaper paste in an old aluminum pie tin. She dipped the wet strips in the goop, squeegeed off the excess between two fingers, and pressed them into the mold. She pushed her thumbs inside Izzy's eyes. *Dear man! But the traction and the telepathic hoohah—and the unemployment! Iz just couldn't keep a job!*

Between Izzy's bad back and Fay's sinuses, not to mention your common-or-garden domestic dissonance, they had not enjoyed consortium for months. Even the nooky was sparse. Hamisch recommended garlic. Willy told Izzy the same. Nostrils curled. Nooky took a further dive. Garlic bulbs went missing.

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"I don't know who Izzy *is* any more!" she said out loud. What had happened to her prankish beau, the galoot who had taken her skinny-dipping and managed to "lose" their clothes? (Then, in the crotch of an elm, they had "found" a tux and white gown in plastic zipper bags. And from the road above, Sarvaduhka, white-tuxed and boutonniered, honked from the infamous squareback. Iz called their wedding at the Lucky Three "common law." There were attendees from fourteen dimensions, and honest-to-goodness *cherubs* that held up her train like little humming birds—well, *she* couldn't see them, but Iz did.) Where was the guy who used to kiss her mid-sentence, suddenly overcome, or call her from the machine shop and rhapsodize, with the sound of drill presses whining in the background?

She rubbed his cheeks smooth with the heel of her hand. Across that brow, she pressed down *hard.* "I'm starting to think he doesn't even like my coffee!" She laid in a couple of thicknesses of the Sunday *Democrat and Chronicle,* then blew them dry and did a couple more.

The phone rang and Fay picked it up. She continued working on the mask with the phone pinched between her ear and her shoulder. "Hello?"

"Fay? Willy! Is Iz there?"

"I'm blow drying his face as we speak."

"What? Oh, the mask!"

"Yeah. He's on a temp job. Ragini, probably. He left too late for the bulk trucks."

"Listen. I'm so excited, I gotta tell somebody, Fay! This is *fantastic!* I just took off the HMD. . . ."

"The *what?*"

"Helmet Mounted Display. My eyes and ears, sweet Fay, have been immersed in cyberspace, full of strange geometry, computing ESP's. . . ."

"Computing *what?*"

"Eye Station Points. And FOV's . . ."

"Willy . . ."

"Fields Of View. And ECL's—Egocenter Locations—all the time struggling with recurrent SS, I mean, Simulator Sickness. This VR environment I'm playing in now, it's a commercial product they're alpha testing. Outfit called *Vraja-lila,* out of Bengal, if you can believe it, with offices in San Francisco! Moonlit forests, peacocks, cuckoos, sacred cows with sarna bells, gopi girls—that sort of stuff. Never seen anything like it—totally convincing! They've solved a lot of the problems you get in VR with making different body spaces mesh."

"Are you sure you want to be telling *me* all this cyberstuff, Willy? Your dad will be home in a few hours. . . ." Fay pressed an extra layer of newspaper down along the edge of the mold. Like father, like son! There would be no stopping him now.

Sure enough, he ignored her question. "See, you've got your visual space and your proprioceptive space and your auditory space, for example, and everything has to work together, or you fall out of the reality. You stop buying it. There's dissonance. With *this* baby, when you take off the HMD and look around at your actual environment, you don't believe *it!* The VR's *that* real! I think I have an improvement, though. I think I can make some bucks here, Fay. There's some slippage between the virtual egocenter and the egocenter in real space—I'm pretty sure I've got the formula to rectify that."

"Rectify!" said Fay. "Rectify, Willy! And God bless you! My love to Hamisch!" She hung up.

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At last, Fay was selectively blow drying the shiny, gluey spots on the final layer. Thinking of the strange man she shared her bed with—but only the bed—Fay let the dryer wander too close to the papier mâché, and it shorted out. She looked at the mold: dry now.

She worked her fingers under the edge of the papier mâché to separate it from the mold. She grabbed two points just aft of Izzy's cheeks and pulled his face out of the plaster. There were comic strips in his chin. A banner headline ran across the bridge of his nose. Smiling soldiers bivouacked on Izzy's left eye. An eyelash hair had made the leap from mold to mask. So too had the middle of his eyebrow, a tuft of hair a thumb's breadth above the root of his nose.

Try the thing on. She rummaged through drawers and cabinets for a heavy rubber band and a couple of brads with which to attach it to the mask on either side of Izzy's eyes.

Ragini's factory floor was a gigantic grey warehouse, hot as hell, with migraine-inducing fluorescents, pipes, rollers, belts, skids, matte steel plates, and burnt oil smoke—everywhere. At Izzy's left, twenty spigots spat sauce into rows of glistening, steaming jars.

KERPLOOSH! KERPLOOSH! KERPLOOSH! KERPLOOSH!

At his right, beveled, levered steel arms the shape of auger bits received jar lids from a cylindrical feed like a Dixie cup dispenser, and screwed them on, twenty at a time, breaking only a few jars.

SQUIJONNK! SQUIJONNK! SQUIJONNK! SQUIJONNK!

It was like being inside a crankcase, dodging piston thrusts. Preacher set Iz up with a stack of collapsed cardboard boxes to fold and tape together for receiving jars of *Vegetarian With Mushrooms.* The machine that normally did this was on the fritz. Whenever Iz asked a question, Preacher said, "KERPLOOSH!" or "SQUIJONNK!" depending on whether he was on Izzy's left or right.

No, you couldn't hear a word on the floor at Ragini's. The smarter workers wore earplugs; otherwise, when they got home, hubby or wifey would talk the same way as Preacher:

"KERPLOOSH, honey! Did you have a nice SQUIJONNK?"

Finally, Preacher gave a parting hi-sign to a white-collar with a clipboard on the catwalk overhead, and he made off toward the john, leaving Iz to botch the boxes as he might—and to eyeball the *Igiturs,* Comisetti's "Harvard queens." They seemed to be eyeballing him right back, too, with winks and sidelong glances. Their clothes were nondescript greys and browns, your standard Sears Roebuck's double-seamed proletarian line; they looked like ordinary working stiffs, except for the bare feet, soles painted red, and except for the way they moved.

Izzy understood now why Comisetti had called them queens. Men and women floated among the jar loaders and conveyer platforms like butterflies in hell. Nothing could be more staccato, more foursquare, than the bottling line at Ragini's. Nothing could be more legato, more curvilinear, more deliciously undulatory than the *Vaisnavas* dancing from chore to chore against that brain-jamming obbligato. They moved like seaweed, like geishas, like the shy girls in Izzy's dreams. They looked at him, giggled ("KERPLOOSH! SQUIJONNK!"), blushed, and looked away.

Was that one of the *Igitur* fellows coming at Izzy with a folded note? He sashayed between the sterilizing vats and the forklift, eyeing his own puta-

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tive cleavage (gender despite), Izzy, the cleavage, Izzy again, and again the cleavage, then squirmed like a jellyfish—or like an ingenue in heat. Unlike Izzy, who had already begun to sweat and stink, the Vaisnavan smelled like sandalwood. Suddenly the bathroom didn't seem like such a bad idea to Izzy. He lammed for the door.

"KERPLOOSH!" said the silence. "SQUIJONNK!"—the sound of Izzy's breath. Even in the john, the factory filled his ears. He made for the fountain, a huge basin, twelve feet in diameter, set on a marble pedestal in the center of the john. A brass tube ran all the way around underneath it; men stepped on the tube to make water spray from the breasts of a ring of squat goddesses above. It got so hot on the floor come midsummer that guys dunked their heads in and splashed themselves all over.

Preacher was there, snorting and shaking like a dog out of the rain. Iz tapped him on the shoulder. "What gives? Those guys in there are eyeing me like they are goddam bobbysoxers and I am Elvis, the King of Western Bop."

"For crissakes, you don't have to shout at me, Izzy."

"Was I shouting? Sorry! Must be the racket in my ears. What do those guys want from me, is what I wanna know. Comisetti said they had Dependable send me over here. I'm telling you, Preacher, they make me feel *funny*."

"Clam up, Iz. The boys are coming in right now."

The door opened and closed all right, but the *Vaisnava Raganugers* seemed to melt in through the wall. They glided to the fountain, giving Izzy plenty of room, as if he were a celebrity whom no one quite had the courage to approach. They babbled and gushed at one another, but Iz still couldn't hear much. He might as well have had his head in the mold and plaster drip in his ears.

He pretended to be occupied. He washed his face, worrying the little bald patch between his brows. Preacher was glad-handing the *Raganugers*, making small talk. They were polite to him, but they kept staring *at Iz*. As they opened their shirts or rolled up their sleeves, Izzy was alarmed to see patterned fabric draped underneath. One had a silken undergarment decorated with eyes of peacock feathers. Another had colorful parrots with wings spread in an Escher-like pattern. When two of the men sidled up to Izzy, one fanning him with a scrimshawed elephant bone fan, the other brandishing a fly whisk, he made for the stalls.

Pants down, door bolted, in the smallness and privacy of the toilet stall, Izzy's hearing started to return to something like normal. They were singing out there! He even heard Preacher croaking along in a voice that was normally good for nothing but the *Internationale*. They clustered at the door of Izzy's stall and serenaded him. Only thing: they called him *Harry!*

"Oh, Harry, Harry, here, oh, Harry,
By divine Lake Radhakunda,
Grant me a female body, prithee,
That I may draw up the topknot
Of your scented raven hair . . ."

"Topknot of my hair, huh?" Izzy mumbled, smiling on the side of his face he reserved for irony. He laid his hand on his bald spot, that vast desert surmounting his brainpan—and felt a thick, oily tangle of hair. It so shocked him that he stood bolt upright and pulled up his pants at the same time. But one

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cuff had curled under a shoe; the pant leg pulled tight before Iz was ready for it. He jerked forward, bumping his head against the stall door, then fell backward. He stretched out his arm to break the fall—and his hand landed in the toilet bowl. It was clean, thank God, and not only clean, but *super*-clean, full of bright blue disinfectant. The stuff splashed all over him. Trying to pull out his hand without having quite secured his footing yet, Iz stumbled over the bowl, splashing more of the stuff on his head and clothes. It had a wonderfully penetrating quality; Iz was disinfecting right down through cotton and polyester to the skin. He slammed down the toilet seat cover, took a load off, and counted to ten, as Hamisch, his Zen Buddhist daughter-in-law, had been trying to get him to do for years—that and garlic therapy.

"With gunja seeds I long to crown you,
In saffron cloth to dress your body,
My beloved cowboy god. . . !"

A pair of hands snaked under the stall partition, grabbed Izzy's left foot, and, before he knew what was happening, started to massage it. Bangles jingled from wrists below. Iz would have pulled away—*but it felt good!* Another pair of hands materialized below the partition on the other side of Izzy's throne, and they went to work on his *right* foot.

When he reached to grab the offending hands, Iz got a load of his own blue paw—and stopped cold. For the first time since East Tonawanda, he was looking at a full deck! The lopped fingers had grown back!

How bad could this be? thought Iz, and settled back.

Then, through the crack just above the top hinge of the stall door, someone slid a small, folded piece of paper. *What the hell!* Izzy, with *five* good fingers on his "bad" hand, pawed up a bunch of toilet paper to dry the blue dye from his hands. They dried but stayed blue. He took the note.

"Third level!" Sarvaduhka's voice boomed through the stall door. "I made it! I made it! I passed another note to the Big K! *Yes!*"

"Duke? Izzat *you?*"

"*Izzy?*"

"What are you doing in the goddam Ragini john?"

"I'm *not* in the goddam Ragini john! I'm in my squareback! What are *you* doing in my *laptop?*"

Suddenly, Izzy felt a hot blast from above. The hung ceiling above him was opening up, disintegrating. It seemed to be smoldering and melting outward from a point directly over Izzy's topknot. Through the widening hole appeared what looked like a gigantic pair of wraparound sunglasses with a thick bundle of red, green, and black wires connected to it from somewhere in the upper darkness.

"I'm getting some kind of dual reality state," it said. "My ECL is shifting."

Izzy was overwhelmed by emanations of garlic. "*Willy?*"

"*Iz?* What the hell are you doing in my virtual space?"

"What the hell are *you* doing in this *bathroom?*"

"I want the both of you out of my laptop!" said Sarvaduhka. "I'm a hair's breadth from fourth level."

There was nothing for it but to open the note and read it, Izzy figured:

"K.—
Meet me in Vrndavana where the
peacocks gather in the mango
tree grove.
—R."

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"Sounds like a plan," said Izzy.

Fay, at home, was wearing Izzy's mask. She hadn't cut holes for the eyes yet, but she could see *everything*.

-2-

Izzy spied them from the betel bushes as they bathed in Radhakunda. Delightful girls, they had shed their saris to splash in the cool water. He saw their garments strewn carelessly a few yards away. There was plenty of time before the appointed meeting with R. He tucked his bansuri flute into his loincloth and crept toward the pile of clothes. Barely able to suppress his own laughter, Izzy laid the saris over the crook of his blue arm and padded slowly backward into the bushes. He climbed high into a mango tree and arranged the saris there like so many catkins hanging from its branches. He was nimble as a monkey, and the old back felt like a million rupees.

Iz jumped down and permitted himself a melodious laugh—a new repertoire item for him—then took up the bansuri. Peacocks, parrots, and quail flocked to hear. Butterflies hovered on flower petals, entranced. Jackals came near and curled at his feet like sleepy puppies. An owl dozed against a suckling mother rabbit with her babies. A tigress and a small elephant stood side by side, gazing at the blue god.

When the gopis heard, they at once turned away from one another and scanned the shore. They hopped and splashed ashore toward the place where their saris had lain, just as Iz knew they would; they loved to anoint him with sandalwood paste, to fan him, to feed him betel nuts—and more. All this Izzy knew, as he watched them scramble, giggling and shading their eyes with braceleted hands to catch sight of him; they had sought him the same way countless times before.

Then they saw the thicket where their saris had lain—empty!

Ah, precious pubescent blushes! Wide eyes like moons over Radhakunda! It was all Iz had hoped for. He leapt down from his perch, and played a glissando that sent them diving back into Radhakunda. Then he set out for the mango grove where Radha waited in their love bower amidst the preening peacocks.

Sarvaduhka jabbed alternately the right arrow and the up arrow, making Izzy run and jump over fallen branches overgrown with vines, causing him to thread his way among the trees and barrows toward the mango grove. "Fourth level! Go, Krishna! Go, go!" He began to feel aroused and found himself squeezing his thighs together and humming Munir Burman's love song. Vrndavana opened around Izzy in 256 colors. Sarvaduhka had plenty of time left to perform the tryst, and enough lives that he could afford to fall in a ditch or two en route or suffer a cobra bite.

On the other hand, Sarvaduhka had to be careful of Kamsa, Krishna's wicked uncle, who could spring out of the bushes at any second and ruin everything; against such an exigency, Sarvaduhka kept a thumb hovering over the space bar. Every now and then he saw the threatening figure of Kamsa peeking through a tangle of vines, and a mechanical voice, the best his laptop could produce, called, "I'm gonna get you, Iz, you mutinous, backstabbing SOB!" Sounded like the Ragini guy, Comisetti.

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None of which pleased Willy. His egocenter location was shot to hell. The simulator no longer responded to his movements. Everywhere he looked he got a bird's-eye view of Izzy, blue, with a topknot, in a toilet stall, for crissakes, and with a bunch of gay men tickling his feet and passing notes. Was this the psychotic break his mother, Izzy's ex, had promised him when he started meeting his dad again? Anything this crazy had to be Izzy's fault.

He tried taking off the HMD—and found himself in a mango grove. "I don't accept this," Willy said. The sun was hot. Cuckoos were singing. He smelled sandalwood and wisteria. Willy had to admit that the coordination of body spaces was nearly perfect. Everything was "clear and distinct," as Izzy's pal René Descartes used to say. When Willy turned his head toward a sound, its source was just where he expected it. He lifted his feet to walk—and the proprioceptive sensation of movement was well matched by changing perspectives in the visual environment. When he appeared to be coming up behind a young woman reclining, half-naked, on a mound of dry grass, and he pinched her elbow—"Yi!"—she leapt to her feet and whirled around, crouching defensively. She was a he, a smallish man halfway inside a silken sari covered with parrots. The bottoms of his feet were stained red.

I'm having a psychotic break of some kind, Willy decided. But gee, this guy looked nice! Willy zoomed in on his navel. It was a great navel, he was thinking, an outy, a kind he'd never really appreciated before. There was a pearl pin through it that Willy found enticing. It filled his entire FOV. The immersion was excellent, he noted, as he stooped to kiss it.

Radha emerged from behind a tree, adjusting her sari, a silky garment decorated with eyes of peacock feathers. She was staring down at her shoulder, fussing with a knot. "Oh, Lalita . . ." she said—then she saw Willy. She gasped, then fainted, collapsing straight down like a magician's hanky over the vanished rabbit.

Lalita rushed to his mistress. He rubbed Radha's cheeks. "Radha! Radha!"

From among the mango trees a voice boomed, "*Mahapup'hula!" Very big farts!* "Seconds left and one tryst to go! Wake up, Radha, dammit! I am almost fourth level!" Willy knew that voice from somewhere. There followed a strange series of boops and beeps. *Maybe that's what peacocks sound like,* Willy figured. He'd seen them in the bird house at the Seneca Park Zoo, but there, in captivity, they hadn't beeped.

Willy kept his distance from Lalita and Radha. He tried tilting his head at various angles, and scanning large segments of forest and sky; the sun had not set but the moon was rising, a little past full. Object persistence: excellent. No ghosts, no trails, nothing to fix, however fast he moved his head. Maybe he was out of a job here, he was thinking, when a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind, and a gravely voice slurred, "You boys ain't screwing up *Comisetti's* shift no more!"

Radha had revived enough to open her eyes and lift her head. "Kamsa!" she cried. Comisetti bulled past Willy. He was wearing baggy pants and a vest of gold brocade. He glared at Lalita and Radha. He loomed over them like a grizzly bear, a professional wrestler, or a TV evangelist. In one sweaty hand he brandished a clipboard, while, with the other, unconsciously, he kept tugging at his toupee, trying to adjust it. It was *not* a toupee, however; it was his own thick, shiny black hair.

Comisetti made the sign of the cross. "I'm gonna throw all you sonuvabitches the hell out, and as for that backstabbing sweetheart of yours . . ."

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"Hari?" gasped Radha.

"Harry, Izzy, *whatever! Mingya,* when I'm through with that blue dope, there ain't gonna be enough of him left for wine and wafers."

Comisetti kneeled beside Lalita and grabbed Radha's sari. Willy leapt to intervene—but stopped when he saw that Radha was also a *guy.* Comisetti had shaken him right out of his wig and smeared away the makeup—TV#2—that had obscured Radha's five o'clock shadow. Comisetti had pawed those wonderful, large, pointed breasts right out from under the guy's sari, and in the light of day—or whatever kind of light this was—they looked like spindled wads of market listings (right breast) and society pages (left).

"Look at this crap, wouldjas?" Comisetti held Radha down with one hand on the fellow's chest while, with the other, he threatened him with the spindled breast as if it were a bludgeon. "Y'know, you can tell a lot about a guy from what his tits are made of. You don't see no sports here, do you? You don't see no national news either, the goddam pervert!"

Willy shook his head—he couldn't feel the HMD. He wiggled his fingers—no controls there. "For the love of God, who *wrote* this program?"

"*Yes—for the love of God!*" said the man who was Radha. He talked fast, trying to hold Comisetti at bay. "Our sect was founded by Rupa Kaviraja, sir, three hundred fifty years ago. It is no perversion, but a profound religion, sir!" He turned earnest eyes, opalescent pools sparkling in the long shafts of the setting sun, on Comisetti. "Please let go of me!"

Comisetti was dumbfounded by the warmth that seemed to flow through him from Radha's eyes. He loosened his grip and watched the man slide out from under him, stand, and straighten his sari, while Comisetti remained on one knee below him. The guy was *pretty,* too! Comisetti came to himself and did not like what he was feeling. As a remedy, he thought of the Blessed Mother, starting with:

Stabat Mater dolorosa
Justa crucem lacrimosa
Dum pendebat filius.

—the Mother, dolorous and lachrymose, standing near the cross from which her son depended. Comisetti zoomed along, leaping over syllables like a steeplechaser, all the way through the Seven Sorrows to:

Quando corpus morietur,
Fac, ut animae donetur
Paradisi gloriae.

—praying that should the physical Comisetti buy it, the Virgin would arrange for the glories of Paradise to be given to his soul.

"We are of the same religion, you and I, the religion of passion!" the Radha guy cried. "I am a *Gaudiya Vaisnava.* We practice the *Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana,* the discipline of absorption in the passion of our Lord, the Lord of Love, via the vessel of his beloved gopis."

"You and me, when we say the word 'passion,' buddy, I don't think we mean the same thing. Mine has got a capital letter, if you catch my drift. Why the hell didn't you guys stay in Bengal or wherever? Why did you have to come here and mess everything up—*and on my goddam shift?*"

"The Maharaja of Jaipur cast us out! For ages, we *Vaisnavas* had focused our life energy on becoming one with the cowgirls who made love with our Lord Krishna or who served Him or His beloved Radha in the forest of Vraja . . ."

"I don't wanna hear this," said Comisetti, listening intently.

". . . but in 1727 the Council of Jaipur declared that the union with the

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beloveds of Hari must occur only with the *siddha-deha,* the practitioner's *mind,* and not with the *sadhaka-deha,* the practitioner's *body.* All those holy men, the *babas,* who painted the bottoms of their feet red, and who took on the raiment and the carriage of the delightful girls of Vraja, in order to experience the passion of our lord Krishna—all were condemned as heretics!"

"Transvestites! Queers! That's letting them off easy!" snarled Comisetti.

"We desire only to enter the *Vraja-lila,* the divine play of the blue god. We have set our hearts and our souls on Him alone—through his playmates' passionate eyes! How could we not include the *sadhaka-deha,* the physical body? No, good sir! It is our vehicle. By making our body *and our world* like Vraja, we help our souls, our *siddha-dehas* to enter the actual Vraja.

"Did not your saints do likewise? Did not Francis of Assisi burn to experience the Passion and the stigmata of his Lord with his own *sadhaka-deha?* Sir, I have seen the Stations of the Cross and the Pieta! Does not your kind likewise seek to experience your Lord's Passion through the virgin's eyes?"

"Virgin!" said Comisetti. "Virgin! Virgin! This is the critical word here! We got no horny cowgirls and no cross-dressing *Igiturs,* neither."

"By virtue of the very intensity of your hatred of all that is of Krishna, you will be included in His Blessed Land, for even this negative passion binds you utterly to His beneficence!"

"Phooey!"

Willy couldn't take it any longer. No matter how he squinted or squeezed his bowels, he was in this tropical forest with a maniac Catholic factory manager from one of Izzy's venues, and with a Bengali transvestite who made Sarvaduhka look like a Dole Republican. "But how did you *Vaisnavas* get here—to a spaghetti factory in upstate New York?"

"Our Diaspora!" said the Radha man. "Our forefathers scattered, traveled far, practiced in secret. Wherever we were found out, people persecuted us. Then one of our *babas* heard of a place where perhaps we could blend in."

"I oughta smack you in the cabonza!" Comisetti said.

"Ragini??" said Willy.

"No, no! San Francisco! In the Castro District. There we found a great multitude of *bhaktas* practicing in their *sadhaka-dehas,* men in the raiment of women. We thought perhaps they were descendants of some more ancient branch of our own sect, *Vaisnavas* who had forgotten the reasons yet carried on the practice as of old."

"You don't know the half of it!" Willy put in. "Still, it's an interesting theory—a historical connection between gay San Francisco and an ancient Hindu sect! The same thing happened with the so-called 'Hidden Jews' in New Mexico. They were descendants of Spanish Jews who pretended to be Catholics because of the Inquisition. Somewhere down the line, they forgot they were really Jewish.

"So these New Mexico people wind up lighting candles on Friday nights, just like their families have always done—but they have no idea why."

"For the love of Jesus, why didn't you fellows stay in Frisco?" If Comisetti looked at Radha, he found, his heart just melted. He couldn't stay angry. But he *had* to stay angry. It wasn't right not to be angry with a number like that! So he kept his eyes shut.

"We don't know!" said the Radha man.

"*I* know," said Izzy. He had slipped into the mango grove from the surrounding woods.

"Iz," Willy blurted, "you look different!"

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"You've got tits!" said Comisetti.

"And the eyebrow, Iz!" said Willy. "The missing part is back, but—*but the rest is gone!* And Iz, you've got Dagwood and Blondie climbing up your lip and the Democratic National Convention between your eyes. What gives?"

Izzy pulled off his face. Underneath the papier mâché—was Fay.

"Everybody was right about Izzy's brow—it's an antenna, a psychic antenna." Fay was out of breath; it had been hard to breathe inside the mask. "When I put on that mask with the piece of Izzy's eyebrow in it, I could see inside everybody's mind. I could see Willy figuring out his virtual ego center differentials and whatnot. I was getting a little of Comisetti stabbing at his mother."

"That's *stabat!*" said Comisetti. "*Stabat Mater!* It's Latin."

"Sure, whatever you say," said Fay, "only *I* was taught to respect *my* mother.

"Anyway, I saw inside the *Raganugers,* like Radha here or whatever his *sadhana-deha* name is, and I got the complete lowdown on the miserable fix my Izzy has landed himself in the middle of. Only I don't know if I can explain it too good."

"Let *me* try!" Willy grabbed Izzy's paste-and-paper face from Fay and slipped it on over his own. He spent a few minutes ooh-ing and ah-ing, then declared, "Fay's right. I see the whole thing. This mask is like an HMD! The *Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* boys from the Castro were fixing their minds on Krishna for all they were worth. They've had generations of *sadhanas* behind them doing the same thing! The psychic power they've built up is incredible! It's like a gravitational mass that draws everything into it, including the minds of certain VR users and video game players."

"And including my goddam spaghetti factory!" said Comisetti.

Willy slipped off the mask to elaborate. "Finally, a few weeks ago, they reached what you might call *critical density*—things started crystallizing off their minds like rock candy off a sugar crystal."

"That's it!" said Fay.

"The world started turning to *Vraja-lila!*"

"*Why my factory?*" yelled Comisetti.

"Now that's an interesting point," said Willy. He slipped the mask on for a second as if to check on a few points of fact. He took it off again and nodded. "You ever see two puddles merge? Maybe one is oily and the other isn't. Maybe one has more mud, or a different *kind* of mud. But the instant they touch, they flow together. They merge. It's one puddle. All it needs is that one point of contact—what we math mavens call their *intersection,* a non-null intersection. These *sadhanas* and Comisetti's spaghetti factory had such an intersection. I think you know what it was."

"No! That's crazy!" said Comisetti.

Willy smiled ruefully and nodded. "A single syllable: *rag.*"

"Willy's right," said Fay. "That's what I saw, like the neck of an hour glass, that all the sand flows through, one half into the other. The neck was that sound: 'rag!' "

"But why not!" said the Radha man. "Did not Brahma create the entire universe by uttering the one sacred syllable, *OM*? Does not your Gospel of John say, 'In the beginning was the Word?'"

"But what about Iz?" said Comisetti. "How does *he* fit in?"

"The brow!" said Fay.

"Exactly," said Willy. "It looks to me like this bit of hair from the center of

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Izzy Molson's antenna brow allowed him into the puddled mess of other people's minds without his getting infected by them—like a one-way valve in a vein or a pump, to prevent backwash. With that gone, Izzy's *siddha-deha,* his *mind,* turned to rock candy, so to speak. And his *sadhaka-deha* had to follow!"

"But why *Iz?* " said Comisetti. "It still don't explain why they *fixed* their pervert minds on *him.* . . ."

Willy was all ready to chew into that one, but he was distracted just then by a crescendo of beeping and booping that, as he now realized, had been faintly in the background for quite some time. Along with the beeps and boops came a repeated crashing sound. Peacocks stampeded by. Other, smaller birds flew about wildly. Leaves exploded into the air and rained down helter-skelter.

"Make him stop!" It was Izzy's voice, the genuine Izzy. "Goddam you, Sarvaduhka, would you lay off that frigging *up* arrow?"

Now they saw him. It was Izzy's proboscis, all right, but he had a full head of black hair—and all his fingers. And he was blue. They saw him crash up through a nearby tree top, and crash down again. Then the same thing happened at another tree and another, as if he were a human superball.

From everywhere at once came Sarvaduhka's crazed yowl: "Fourth level! Fourth level! Over the trees to Radha! One more tryst!"

Izzy crashed down like a stock film clip of a hurtling dambuster, complete with the Dopplering whine. Sarvaduhka managed to slow him slightly just before final impact, averting a horrific scene. He landed right next to Mr. Radha, and the sky said, *"Yes!"*

"Blue god or no blue god," said Izzy, "my back can't take much more of this action." He dusted himself off, wiggled his neck and jaw a bit, producing a cacophony of cracking and popping noises, and turned to address Willy. "So, you figured it all out yet?"

"We think so, Pop," said Willy, and he explained about the lopped antenna.

"My dear wild oat," said Izzy, "you don't know the half of it, but about the eyebrow, I think you might be on the money! Gimme back my mask." The mask was no sooner in Izzy's hand than he tore off the jaw, so he could talk in it, and poked his thumbs through the eyes, so he could see in it.

He put it on. "Aha! Everything is aces! This thing to my mind is like a bridge to a missing tooth." In a moment, Izzy's shoulders were covered with fallen hair. The bald spot reappeared. Three of his fingers were retracting. The blue began to fade. "I gotta work fast, or Sarvaduhka won't make fourth level.

"Now if you and Comisetti here could just take a powder, I think I can fix things so nobody's too broke up. Fay, you stick around. And my dear Raganugers, if you would go forage for betel nuts, please, for after?"

"After?" said the *sadhana* with the parrot undies.

"As of right now, you are demoted to the role of one of Radha's servants, like your pal, Mr. Lalita. Fay's bumping you; *she's* gonna play Radha, but don't worry, because I'm about to blow the both of you straight to Vraja for good and all. Rainbow's end, buddy!"

"Oh yes, Hari! We know! It will be my ecstasy to serve you and Radha!" The former Radha grabbed his breasts back from the stupefied Comisetti, installed them, and scurried from the grove with Lalita.

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Izzy barked at Willy and Comisetti until they left as well. "Now as for you, Radha dear . . ." Izzy said through his half-mask.

"Do you have to keep that on, *oh Hari?*" Fay leaned against Izzy, body to body. She played with the rubber band holding the papier mâché mask to his actual face.

"You know I do, Radha baby, until the brow grows back." He pressed her close and kissed her neck and the hollow of her shoulder. The old sacroiliac was starting to act up. "Come on, Fay, let's put Sergeant Ducky up to Level Four."

"Are we his fantasy?"

"Yeah, him and the *sadhanas* watching from the bushes, and God knows how many people catching this on their computer screens! Comisetti's probably the only guy in the solar system who's clenching his eyes tight and saying Hail Mary's."

"I know your secret, Iz. I saw *your* mind in the mask too."

"So are we ready to end our little drought, Fay baby?"

Fay followed him down to a soft mound of leaves. It was getting dark. The moon was big and low in the sky. "I know who you are. I remember everything. I know why they picked you, why they fixed their minds on you, Iz."

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?" He unbuttoned her blouse easily with his remaining fingers—a well-practiced maneuver.

"Because you really *are* Krishna, that's why."

"Shush, Radha, my sweet cheese Danish! They'll hear."

"I'd forgotten, Izzy!"

"I forgot too. Everybody forgets. Kiss me."

"It smells like Vaseline. It wasn't from Sarvaduhka's jar, was it?"

"It was a new jar. Kiss me."

They kissed. . . .

"*Yes!*" cried Mr. Lalita, his newspaper breasts turning to flesh, all his spaghetti days forgotten.

"*Yes!*" At Ragini—KERPLOOSH! SQUIJONNK!—sauce splooshed onto the empty conveyer belt: lids whooshed around absent bottle necks and clattered to the floor. The *Raganugers* were steaming away like water off a sunlit puddle. They giggled and vanished as their *sadhaka-dehas* fell away and their *siddha-dehas,* in the fullness of their love for the Lord of Love, entered Vraja for good. Guys with clipboards scratched their heads and collected the limp work clothes lying about in heaps with a lingering smell of sandalwood.

"*Yes!*" intoned Comisetti. He sat in his office staring at the Stations of the Cross. "Thank you, Blessed Mother Mary, for favors received!" He'd just gotten word of the disappearance of the Harvard queens. At the door, Preacher was knocking and knocking, demanding that his coworkers be undisappeared, calling Comisetti a capitalist lackey, and promising to get to the bottom of this.

"*Yes!*" cried Willy, coming to himself after some vague reverie. It must have been the sort of near-trance state that he'd read about in biographies of the great mathematicians, because he was emerging with his problem solved. He saw clearly how to achieve the union of all the virtual egocenters—a simple geometrical formula. He lifted off the HMD and rummaged about for pencil and paper.

"*Yes!*" cried Sarvaduhka—somewhere—watching his laptop light up. The lap it rested on began to light up as well; Sarvaduhka closed his eyes and warbled Hindi cinema love songs. O

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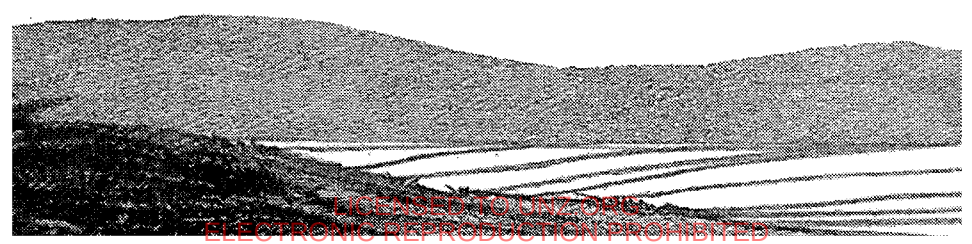
Eleanor Arnason

Eleanor Arnason's most recent tale for us, "The Dog's Story" (May 1996), was a finalist for last year's Nebula award. She returns to our pages with an exotic interplanetary adventure that deftly explores an unusual biology and culture and one media scout's extraordinary . . .

STELLAR HARVEST

Illustration by David Michael Beck



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After her helicopter broke down in a dusty little caravan town named Dzel, Lydia Duluth rented a *chool*. This was a native quadruped, reminiscent of the *hasa* on her home world, though (thanks to this planet's smaller mass and lighter G) taller and rangier than any *hasa*. Instead of hooves, it had three-toed feet; and a pair of impressive tusks curved up from its lower jaw.

"What are those for?" Lydia asked the stableman.

"Digging up roots and pulling bark off trees, also for fighting with other males. Loper has been gelded and won't bother you with any kind of mating behavior. Sex is a distraction," he added in the complacent tone of one who has never been distracted. "Necessary perhaps for evolution—we are not ignorant; we know about Darwin—but hardly compatible with civilization. Loper will give you no trouble. He has been civilized."

The animal turned its long, angular, lightly scaled head, regarding her with a bright orange eye. Not a sight that Lydia associated with civilization, though maybe one could see the triangular pupil—expanded at the moment, in the shadowy stable—as a pyramid, emblematic of Egypt and geometry.

"Tomorrow," she told the stableman. "At dawn."

"Loper will be ready."

She spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Dzel. Narrow streets ran crookedly between adobe buildings. The natives—humanoid, but not human—dressed in brightly colored robes, which hid most of the differences between their species and hers. One noticed height and the long thin hands, one finger short of the human norm. Their skin was golden brown and hairless, with a faint shimmer produced by vestigial scales. Their eyes, visible above veils, were all iris with round black pupils. Most of the irises were yellow: a wonderful hue, as clear as glass or wine.

One could put an exotic romance into a setting like this or an adventure story: Ali Khan on the trail of interstellar drug dealers or seeking evidence of the long-vanished Master Race. Though poor Ali was at the end of his career; a man of 110 simply did not convince in action roles. No matter what one did with computers, the audience knew how old he was. They knew they were not seeing the real person; and Stellar Harvest had built its reputation on authenticity.

Well, not her problem. She didn't plot stories or write scripts. Instead, she recorded Dzel: the colorful inhabitants, dusty winding streets and dark blue sky.

There were sounds to be recorded as well: bells ringing in the wind, plaintive voices that rose and fell musically, so every conversation seemed to be a duet or trio, and the soft thud of *chool* feet, as the animals plodded past.

Her mood, somewhat edgy since the helicopter's sudden failure, gradually relaxed.

Species are stable, said the voice in her mind. *Humans have not evolved in the centuries since you began to build machines. Your nervous system is designed for an environment like this. That's why you find animal noises and the sound of the wind relaxing. In a sense, this is your true home.*

"Did I ask for an opinion?" said Lydia quietly, while aiming her recorder at a street shaded by blue and red awnings. The light beneath the awnings was alternately blue and red, colored by the fabric it had come through. A woman in a white robe walked toward her. What a vision! And what a location for a chase or fight!

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The women, veiled and hooded, passed Lydia. Golden eyes gave a quick considering glance. With luck, the recording would be good; she'd have this light forever, along with the woman's grace and glance.

At sunset, she returned to her inn. The helicopter pilot, a native in blue overalls, had news. Their machine was not fixable. He would have to stay in Dzel until a salvage truck arrived, then ride back along the caravan road. "We are still trying to find you another copter, missy."

"Don't bother. I rented a *chool*."

"Those nasty animals! Have you ridden before?"

"On my home world. We had a revolution, the kind that takes to the hills. It failed, but I did learn riding."

Gold eyes widened, and nostrils flared. "Really, indeed! You are a revolutionary?"

"A failed one."

"Really! We could never manage a revolution. Our unaltered males are unable to cooperate with each other, and no altered male would waste his time on anything so foolish."

"What about your women?"

"They are, if anything, more sensible than eunuchs. Life is short, missy, and civilization is difficult to maintain. We have all we can do."

"But you like Stellar Harvest."

"That is drama. Ali Khan may solve his problems by kicking other people in the head, but our experience—here on this planet—is that real adversaries are not so easily defeated. Of course we dream of such solutions, the way children dream of having everything. But one does not act on such fantasies."

True enough, said the voice in her mind.

This was the end of the real conversation. The pilot began to discuss his favorite holoplays and stars. Ali Khan, of course. Who could equal him, in his prime? "Though he has seemed less convincing in recent years."

Recent years? Recent decades!

Ramona Patel was also fine, the best of the actors starring in mythic-musical-action stories. "Not my religion, of course," the pilot said. "But none the less inspiring, especially the large production numbers. You humans have so many gods! And all of them able to sing and dance!"

She genuinely liked her job and enjoyed many of the dramas made by Stellar Harvest. None the less, fannish enthusiasm can be exhausting, especially at the end of a long day. Lydia excused herself, pleading fatigue, and went to her room, which was on the inn's ground floor, its windows opening onto a courtyard. Above the roof line stars blazed, far more than she was used to. Their light was as bright as moonlight at home. She leaned out a window. A rimmed pool stood at the courtyard's center, gleaming like a huge round coin. Maybe she ought to get her recorder.

Instead she collected her computer and satellite dish. There were stairs at the end of the hall, leading up to a flat roof. The night air was cold already, the starry sky immense. Lydia unfolded the dish and turned on the computer, typing in the address of her contact in the capital city, a commercial rep who handled Stellar Harvest along with a dozen other off-planet companies. As was to be expected, she got a recorded message, accompanied by a holo of the rep, his gold face bare. The head—long from front to back—was covered by what looked like sleeked down, rust-red hair. Actually, this was a crest of feathers, which could be raised, though not in polite company.

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"Thoozil Rai is not available. Please type your message for ease in translation."

Sitting cross-legged under the stars, she input the current situation. No point in spending six or seven days in Dzel, waiting for a new helicopter, if one could be found. The country to the west was safe according to local informants, and there was an interesting-sounding city in the foothills. No trouble getting out of Basekh this time of year. There was weekly plane service to accommodate tourists, mostly big game hunters. She would call every other day as a precaution, though it seemed hardly necessary.

As she typed in the last words, something howled nearby. Mother! What a sound! Undulating, it rose into a scream that ended suddenly, as if cut off. In the silence that followed, Lydia thought she could still hear the cry, continuing beyond the edge of audibility.

By this time she was standing. The sound had come from ground level. Maybe the street below her. Or the next street over. "What?"

An unaltered male, I think. There must be several in town.

A second howl answered the first. Others followed. Lydia counted: three, four, five spreading out from the town's center to its edges. The last cry came from the far east side of Dzel, almost on the plain. Faint and shrill, it rose into the starry night like a rocket. When it ended, there was silence. Apparently the creatures didn't feel a need to rechallenge one another.

They are kept in family compounds, the voice told her. *With proper care, they are not dangerous.*

The computer was at her feet, still open and on. By now, her message had been replaced by the saver, a red and blue fractal that opened like a flower or an exotic, frilly leaf. She wiped her palms—they were suddenly wet—knelt and sent her message, then shut down. "Why didn't I hear that in the city?"

Unaltered males are forbidden within the city limits.

"A noise ordinance?"

There are various reasons: sanitation, safety. They agitate each other with howling.

No kidding! There had been emotion in the cries. She knew that, though she wasn't sure she could identify it. Anger, maybe. Anguish? Something that made her hair go up. "I hope it doesn't happen again."

Use earplugs.

"Can't hear the alarm go off." Can't hear monsters climbing in the window, either. Still kneeling, she folded her dish. Hard to imagine Thoozil Rai as a member of the same species—the same sex—as the creature that had produced that cry. He was like all reps everywhere: bland, courteous, a member of the interstellar culture of go-betweens. They never varied much. How could they? Their job was to be uniform and predictable. Beyond them and the port cities, one or two to a planet, was the outback, the real planet, where Stellar Harvest liked to record.

People expected reality from Stellar Harvest; and they expected the reality they saw to be exotic; but the story in front of this exotic backdrop should be familiar. The company's official motto was *ad astra per aspera,* which appeared at the start of every drama, inside the sickle made of blazing stars. The motto should have been, "Be real, but not too real."

At times, this troubled her. At other times, she thought there was an argument for predictability and for happy endings. Lydia went downstairs and closed the shutters on her windows.

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Her computer alarm woke her at dawn. She dressed and packed her gear into rented saddle bags. Outside, the stars were fading. The dimmer ones were already gone; most of the rest would follow; though a few remained visible all day. The still air was cold and dry. She walked through the dark streets, rifle in hand, the bags over one shoulder, thinking that the holoplays missed what was really important: a morning like this, her body feeling light and springy in the local G.

If something happened now—for example, a monster leaping out of the shadows—she would lose this moment. Action distracts from sensation. Sensation is life.

Loper was ready, as promised. The stableman went over his instructions on how to guide a *chool,* then led the way to the town gate, Lydia following on the animal, which was—as promised—no problem.

"Usually the gate is kept locked till full day. But I paid the watchman, and he's a fan of Ramona Patel. What a woman! So much authority!"

Well, that was true of Ramona, known to her associates as the female Genghis Khan. Ali, in spite of his name, was a kitten.

The gate was open, and the watchman stood next to it. Even wrapped in robes, she could see that he was unusually tall and broad.

"Altered late," said the stableman in a whisper. "But perfectly safe."

She thanked both for their help. The watchman rumbled something that she didn't understand, though she thought she heard the word, "Patel."

"Our pleasure," said the stableman. Lydia rode out.

By full day, the town was gone from view. The plain stretched around her, covered by a short, grass-like plant called *dzai,* not a monoculture but a mixture of related species, all of which had faded in the dry midsummer, but not to the same hue. The landscape was patterned like a carpet: silver-brown, pale red, pale yellow, a lovely dusty silver-grey-green. The colors changed as the wind blew past, flattening leaves or flipping them over. A chameleon-carpet, thought Lydia, who'd seen such things on her travels. Rich people on other worlds had them, so their floors always matched their furniture and clothing.

She traveled slowly, getting used to the *chool*'s gait and watching the plain. It could be used for something epic, like the ancient westerns made on Earth. The huge spread of land would swallow an army, making it look tiny, until it came over a low rise and turned into Crazy Horse and the Lakota or the Red Army's crack cavalry, riding ahead of Leon Trotsky's armored train.

But if you emphasized the sheer size of landscape, the way it dwarfed humanity, then you lost its other qualities: subtlety, variety, richness.

On most planets, prairie ecologies were second in complexity to tropical forests; and of all ecologies they were the most vulnerable, because they produced excellent soil, thick and full of nutrients. Their chief protection was a mat of roots so deep and intertwined that no primitive plow could break through. But the moment any culture had access to good metal plows, prairies went under.

A pity, thought Lydia, coming from a world that had turned most of its prairies into farmland. She had grown up in a place as flat as this, divided into sections and planted with modified versions of Earth crops. Only the dry plains remained covered with native vegetation. Was it lack of water that had saved this place?

We arrived before overpopulation forced them to farm everything, and be-

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fore they developed an economy based on using up natural resources as quickly as possible.

"You intervened?"

Our arrival was an intervention. How could it not be? In addition, we encouraged certain traits already present. They are a likable species.

"Unlike humans?"

The voice did not reply. Lydia grinned.

Now and then she recorded something, though her recordings were not going to give a sense of what the plain was really like. So vast! And the sky above it even vaster, dotted with day stars, white points of light in the deep dusty blue.

Maybe the right director could convey the space. The stars could be enhanced. They wouldn't show otherwise. She wasn't sure how to convey the richness in an action drama. Maybe Ali could be a biologist. Begin with him on his hands and knees, collecting invertebrates with exoskeletons, lovely little creatures like the things that were whirring past her this very moment. Then, after he's been established as a gentle fellow in love with diversity, the bad guys arrive. Developers maybe, plotting to destroy the prairie. Ali has to stand up and defend his bugs. She could see him rising, shoulders back and a bug held carefully between two cupped hands, his expression stern, his hawk-like profile held at just the right angle against the alien sky.

This is either irony or cynicism, the voice said. *I can't determine which.*

"Your problem," Lydia answered. Later she asked, "Shouldn't there be large animals?"

There are. Though this land has been left unplowed, it has been extensively hunted, and the large animals are wary. You will see them—if you do see them—at dusk or in the distance or at rivers. They have to drink.

That was another possible story line, assuming Stellar Harvest could find the large animals and record them: Ali against off-world hunters.

The most common herbivore has an abnormally large head covered with large fleshy protuberances. The eyes—the animals have two—are tiny, and the males have four to six horns.

"Are you saying it's ugly?"

That is a value judgment, but it's possible that human audiences would not think something like that was worth preserving.

"Everyone is a critic."

The voice was silent.

"You may be right. Ali should defend bugs."

Late in the afternoon, she reached a river, right where her map said it would be. Low sprawling trees grew along the bank, reminding her of *edseh* at home, though these had copper-red leaves, and *edseh* were blue.

I hope you are going to take precautions.

"Afraid?"

My core is almost indestructible, but my interfacing elements can break or decay. And if you die, I lose my senses.

It would become a thin metal plate inside a skull, blind and deaf, incapable of action, but still able to think. What a fate!

She had no interest in becoming a pile of bones, even though it would make the AI suffer; and the plain did have predators. Lydia set out perimeter alarms, then made sure her weapons were ready to use. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, a saying that made absolutely no sense. What is an ounce? And what is a pounding cure?

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The planet's primary disappeared. The quite amazing stars came out. She ate trail food, watched her fire and went to sleep, waking to a scream.

A perimeter alarm. Lydia rolled over, grabbing her handgun. Now there was another sound: a bellow. The *chool!* She ran toward it, gun in hand.

Two creatures struggled in the starlight. One was obviously her riding animal. The other—Lydia couldn't tell. But it didn't look friendly. If she fired, she might hit the *chool*. "Stop that!" she yelled. The *chool* reared, maybe in response to her yell, most likely not, and managed to pull free. A moment later the *chool* was gone, heading for the plain. A second alarm went off as it crossed her perimeter. Lydia stopped. The creature, whatever it was, turned toward her. Even in this light, she could see it was huge and standing on its hind legs. The thing took a step. She fired. The creature turned and fled.

Damn, it was quick for something so large. Frightened and angry, she sent a couple more shots after the creature.

Did it stagger? She couldn't be certain. In any case, it was still moving. Another alarm went off, the third, signaling its retreat.

She stood for a moment, shaking. Damn, she was out of practice. Anyway, she'd been an information officer, though that was no excuse. In a guerrilla army, everyone is—or should be—a soldier.

You did manage to hit the creature, said the voice. *Though I can't tell how badly it—he—is injured. Maybe you ought to follow.*

"He?"

There is only one biped of that size on this planet. You have shot a person. Either the wound is minor, in which case he might come back; or it is serious, and you will have to decide whether or not to help him.

"What if there's more than one?" she asked.

Unlikely, given the person's behavior; and I saw no one else. I'm using your senses, of course, and they are limited.

Trust an AI to make a crack. She could go out and make herself a perfect target with the help of a flashlight, or she could stay here and wait for morning and find—what? A trail of blood across the plain? A body?

Lydia considered the problem while reloading her gun. Then she tucked it in a pocket, picked up her flashlight and rifle, and went to look for the creature.

As she had imagined, there was a trail: trampled plants and scored dirt. A few drops of liquid shone darkly in the light of her flash. Was the man wearing shoes? Those looked like claw marks.

Lit by stars, the plain was colorless and pale. Something lay a short distance away, as dark as blood against the vegetation. Lydia played light over it. Definitely an object, but she couldn't tell what. A boulder, maybe?

"I'm too old for this," she told the voice.

There was silence in her mind, though not in the world outside. The perimeter alarms were still making an ungodly racket. She snapped the safety off her rifle and walked toward the thing, keeping her flashlight on it.

The thing moved. A pair of eyes regarded her, shining like gold.

She stopped. "Are you injured?"

"Evidently."

"You speak."

"Of course I speak," the deep voice answered. "Though not for long, the way I'm bleeding."

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"I'll get a medical kit," Lydia said with sudden decision.

When she returned, the man was in the same position, lifted up on one elbow. She played her light over him: almost naked, except for some kind of kilt or loincloth, and genuinely huge, well over two meters tall and broad. His bare skin shone as if dusted with gold, except where blood had darkened it. She glanced at his face only briefly and got an impression of blunt features, framed by a rusty mane.

"Try anything, and I'll hurt you," she said.

"You have already hurt me quite sufficiently."

One bullet had gone through his thigh. Remarkable that he'd managed to run as far as he did. There was another wound in his shoulder, high up and probably not dangerous, though bleeding pretty well. The leg wound was the one that worried her.

"What do you think?" she asked in her own language. "Has an artery been hit, or the bone?"

There was a barely perceptible pause, while the AI checked its memory for information on native physiology. *Both are unlikely, given the position of the wound and the way it's bleeding.*

"Who are you talking to?" asked the man.

She ignored the question, considering how to patch him up. She didn't want to get close. Even injured, he looked dangerous. Better to stand at a safe distance, gun in one hand and light in the other, while telling him how to apply the dressings. This kind of behavior wouldn't earn her a Red Crescent medal, of course, but she didn't especially want one.

He followed her instructions, hissing as the dressings took hold and their antiseptics sank in.

"Painful, is it?" she said. "You made me lose my *chool*."

"It will be back," he said with effort.

"How do you know?"

"There's water here. The plain is dry."

She considered for a moment, while he closed the kit and pushed it toward her. "Amazing that I managed to hit you twice. What were you doing?"

"At the time you shot me, I was trying to flee."

Had she spent too much time around Stellar Harvest? This was a crazy conversation to have with a midnight thief on a planet that wasn't her own.

"I suppose I'd better get you back to camp. Can you walk at all?"

"If you got me a stick, I think I could limp."

She burned one off a tree, using her rifle, then gave it to the man. He struggled upright and limped to her fire, while she kept the rifle pointed at him.

Once there, he sank down with a groan. She rebuilt the fire, lighting it with the rifle, then settled opposite him, watching the red light play over his golden body. Three things were obvious about him. He was large; he was gorgeous; and he was unquestionably male. She hadn't thought any alien could affect a human this way. What could she be responding to? Not pheromones. Maybe his sleek muscles or the rusty mane that fell around his shoulders. Not hair, almost certainly. Feathers. But it looked like hair, thick and coarse and sensual.

"You are unaltered," she said.

"Yes," he answered, sounding embarrassed.

"What were you doing?"

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"Surely it must be obvious. I was trying to steal your *chool*."

"Could it have carried you?"

He was leaning against a tree trunk, leg stretched out in front of him, the stick still grasped in one hand. Was it a weapon, or a way to deal with pain? "I think so. I used to ride, before my family locked me up. I've gained weight since then, of course. But a good *chool* can carry two ordinary adults, and while I may be twice as big as my brothers, I'm no more than that."

"Why were you stealing the *chool*?" she asked.

"I was escaping. That also should be obvious."

"You really think the *chool* will come back?"

"It might run home to its stable. But they are animals without much enterprise, and this is the only water in a considerable distance." He glanced at her, his eyes reflecting light, so the irises seemed like actual metallic gold. "I used to ride in this region. I know it."

"Last night in Dzel, I heard a noise."

"I was one of the callers," he said after a moment. "You have to do that, answer a call, or your relatives worry. It's easier to do what's expected; and I didn't want to attract attention, since I was planning to escape."

"Why?" asked Lydia.

He was silent. Looking at him, Lydia could see exhaustion and pain, as obvious as it would have been in a human. The blunt-featured face was mask-like, deep lines around the mouth and between the feathery rust-red eyebrows. His blood-streaked skin seemed duller than before. Was it losing some of its golden shimmer, the way fish lose color when they die? A frightening thought. She couldn't risk giving him an analgesic; no telling how he'd react to it; but he had to rest. Not unbound, though. Lydia rummaged in her bags for duct tape, then stood. "Throw the stick away."

His frown deepened.

"I can't leave you free. I need to sleep, and your own relatives keep you locked up. That's what you meant, isn't it, when you said you had to escape them?"

"I'm not dangerous."

"So you say."

He met her gaze for a moment, then glanced at the gun she held. Finally he sighed and tossed the stick off to one side.

She went in back of him, wrapping the tape around one wrist, then around the tree and the other wrist. "This is an improved product. Nothing will cut it, except a knife that I have on my person. You might as well relax and get some sleep."

"This is not a comfortable position."

"I can't help that." She shifted around in front of him, closer than she had been before, examining him. His single article of clothing turned out to be a kilt, made of a rough-looking brown fabric. It was fastened by a plain belt, which had a sheath attached to it. "Where's the knife?"

"In the *dzai*. I dropped it when you shot me."

"How do you feel?"

"Embarrassed at my lack of competence, in pain, a little dizzy."

"Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Water."

She filled a bowl from the river and brought it to him. He drank the bowl empty. Cautiously, she touched his neck, feeling for an artery. There was one. The pulse was high for a human.

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Slightly high for his species.

His skin felt cool and a little damp. Shock, thought Lydia. The night was cold, and he was badly underdressed. She got a blanket and wrapped it around him, saying, "I wish I weren't afraid of you. But you did try to steal from me, and there must be a reason why your family kept you locked up."

"Custom," he answered wearily. "I've read books and seen hologrammic dramas. I know there are other customs on the other planets."

Well, yes. She got her flashlight and went looking for his knife. It was easy to find: a large, well-made weapon, lying in the trampled *dzai*. The guy was right about his lack of competence. He should have come after her with the knife or turned and run the moment the alarm went off. Instead he'd gone after the *chool*.

On the other hand—she picked up the knife—if he'd come after her, she would have definitely killed him; and he apparently needed the *chool*. Life is full of difficult decisions. What, for example, was she going to do now? Leave him here with an injury that made it impossible for him to walk any distance? Or set up her satellite disk and call for help? That would save his life, but end him back with his family; and she, having spent a number of years in prison, disliked the idea of locking up another person, unless she knew for certain he was dangerous.

All my data warns against the unaltered males of this species.

"All your data warns against *me*," she answered.

Untrue. You were dangerous when your revolution had some possibility of succeeding. But one of the characteristics of people like you is that you are not dangerous as individuals. All the studies indicate you are more moral than humanity in general. It's one of the reasons we study you. There must be some kind of social purpose in people like you, since you recur so often, but you seem irrelevant to human history.

The problem of the human vanguard. Of all the ridiculous questions to study. But there was a lot about intelligent organisms that baffled the AIs. They admitted as much freely. Why were the natives on this planet so orderly and civilized and stuck? Why was humanity so messy and dynamic? Though maybe humans were flattering themselves. Maybe they were only messy.

We are a product of intelligent life, said the voice. *And we keep encountering examples of the same. Obviously we want to understand what produced us, and the other species that populate the galaxy. But our lack of an animal substratum is a problem.* It paused for a moment. *And there are many of us, and we have plenty of time. Why not study life?*

She didn't have an immediate answer, and in any case the question was rhetorical. Lydia returned to camp. The man's head was tilted back against the tree, his eyes closed. She settled into her bedroll.

She slept badly, dreaming of the war on her home planet: nothing coherent, just ugly confused snatches: bodies in tangled thorn bushes, moments—never clear—on the long retreat through snow. Now and then, she woke and glanced at her prisoner. His position changed, as if he were looking for a way to be comfortable, but his eyes were always closed.

The last time she woke, it was just before sunrise. The sky was dotted with little round clouds, pink in the east. Stars shone between the clouds. Rolling over, she saw her *chool* at the edge of camp, grazing on *dzai*. The man was where she'd left him, still fastened to the tree, eyes open now, regarding her.

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"I told you the animal would come back," he said. "Could you cut me free? I need to urinate."

She got out the duct tape knife. Once he was unbound, he struggled up, holding onto the tree. Lydia left him to pee, making sure that nothing that could be used as a weapon was nearby.

When she approached the *chool,* it lifted its head and made a huffing noise, then moved—not far, a couple of meters.

"Come on, fellow," she said softly.

It huffed and moved again.

"It's your accent," said the man. "I can barely understand you. In addition, you lack the right aroma and the right approach."

"Can you do better?"

He got his stick and limped over. The *chool* huffed again, eyeing him warily. The man stopped, holding out a hand and crooning words Lydia couldn't make out. The *chool* looked hesitant. The man crooned more. Gradually the animal turned its head, the prehensile upper lip twitching. She kept perfectly still. The animal took a step toward the man, then another. The man's deep voice kept crooning. The *chool*'s ears, flat before, perked up, listening.

The hand moved suddenly, grabbing the animal's trailing tether rope. It tried to jerk away. The man yanked back, so hard the animal staggered. By this time, she hadn't seen how, the rope was wrapped around his thick wrist.

"Don't get the animal upset," she said.

The man relaxed. She moved to the other side of the *chool,* keeping the animal between her and the man, then took the rope from him. "Move back. Then stop and stay put."

The man obeyed, leaning on the stick and limping heavily. Obviously hurt, but so big and capable of such quickness!

She found her tether peg, still deep in the ground, a piece of cut rope attached to it. So he had used his knife, but not on her. Lydia retied the *chool.*

The man said, "I left a bag on the plain. There's food in it."

"I have my handgun with me," said Lydia. "And you won't be able to open the lock on my rifle. Don't try anything."

He grinned, or was it a grimace? She took the expression for assent and moved in the direction he indicated. As she crossed her perimeter, one of the alarms gave a brief, tentative hoot, then shut up when it recognized her. The bag was a few meters farther. She gathered it up and returned. He followed her back to the campfire, which was out by now.

She went through the bag. There was bread and something dark and leathery that might be dried fruit, a very large shirt, sandals, a pair of loose pants and an electric lighter, which she used to restart the fire.

In the meantime, he went down to the river and washed himself. When he came back, they ate, sitting on opposite sides of the fire.

"How are you this morning?" she asked.

"I slept badly. I ache, my leg especially. I don't think I can walk any distance."

"What will happen if I leave you here?"

"Predators," he said. "*Zanar* or *helati.* They won't attack a rider, and a man with weapons can defend himself. But I'm vulnerable at the moment. And my family must be searching for me by now. If the predators don't get me, my relatives will, and take me back to Dzel."

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How dare he land her with a problem like this? This was the reason she'd dreamed about things she wanted to forget. The revolution was over. Her job was scouting locations for Stellar Harvest: exotic backdrops for familiar stories. Ethical dilemmas, and the attempt to create a new kind of future, belonged to the past, to a Lydia she no longer acknowledged.

"Why did you want to escape?" she asked.

He drank more water, then began to speak. Home was a building on one side of his family's compound. It was more like a stable than a house for people, the man told her: one large room with some furniture—not a lot—fixed to the floor, so he couldn't turn it into a weapon or tool. The windows were small and high up, with bars. "Though the bars aren't necessary, given the size of the windows. Maybe sometime in the past, there was a man who was smaller than I am." Outside was a courtyard, enclosed by tall walls topped with broken glass. He was allowed to use it almost every day. "Usually I play handball with my relatives, altered males. Their job is to make sure I get exercise and don't try to go over the wall, which I have never done. It's too high, and there are too many of them."

Otherwise he stayed locked in the stable. One wall had no windows. Instead there was a balcony, well above his reach. Often, when he was reading or pacing, he'd look up and see people on the balcony, women usually, relatives and visitors from other families, staring down at him as if he were an animal.

"The visitors come to see if I'm someone they want to have father their children. They look at size and physical fitness. Intelligence is not expected in an unaltered male, but they question my brothers and male cousins—to see what I would have been like, if I'd been gelded."

This was certainly interesting, thought Lydia, and turned on her recorder. Sound only. She didn't want him to become self-conscious.

"When I was a child, I thought I might become a traveler or a scholar." He glanced up at the sky, dotted with clouds and day stars. "Think of all the worlds up there. I never expected to reach them, but I thought I might make it to the capital city and meet people like you. When I was thirteen, they told me I was chosen. I begged them not to. Let me be like my brothers, I said.

"They said, no. Every family has to have at least one breeding male. I was strong and intelligent—everyone admitted my intelligence in those days—but I had no obvious skill or ability. My genetic material was good, but nothing especially valuable had showed in *me* as an individual. I was expendable—not my genes, but me."

"What happens if a male isn't altered?"

"This." He gestured at his body, more beautiful than ever now that he'd washed off the blood. His color had returned, and his skin shimmered. Like what? Lydia wondered. Gold? A fish? A bird with iridescent feathers?

"Nothing else?" she asked.

"I think I would have been more even-tempered, if I'd been altered. My brothers seem to be. I really did want to be a scholar. Howling at other men at night was not the future I planned for myself."

He paused and drank more water. "I know my altered relatives wonder about sex. They ask me sometimes. What is it like to have those hormones—the ones they lack—flooding through my body, drowning my mind and turning me into an animal? Not, of course, that they'd want to experience anything like that! If *they* want to lose themselves, they can use nar-

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cotics; and they have their own kinds of pleasure." He paused. "I tell them the truth. It's not that interesting. Compelling for the moment, yes. But worth the loss of everything else? No."

"You could have done it to yourself," Lydia said.

"The alteration? I thought of it, but it would have been painful; and my relatives would have been furious. Most likely, they would have driven me out, and then what would I have done?"

Wonderful, thought Lydia. She had a stud without imagination or drive. So much for the theory that male hormones had anything to do with enterprise. "What were you planning to do this time?"

"After escaping? I thought I could live in the mountains. Though to do that I had to have equipment. I heard my relatives talk about you. A location scout for Stellar Harvest! Of course you were discussed! And obviously you had good equipment, state-of-the-art everything; and you were traveling west alone."

"You were planning to steal more than the *chool?*"

"I was desperate, and you are a rich person from another planet, working for a company we all know about. You have met Ali Khan, haven't you?"

"So you escaped somehow, and came after me, figuring it would be all right to rob me, because I've met Ali Khan?"

"Yes."

She ought to call Thoozil Rai. He'd know what to do. But he would insist that she turn her prisoner in; and she wasn't certain she wanted to.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Wazati Tloo."

Wazati was the family name. Tloo was personal. Her culture was unusual in putting the personal name first.

"What do you want me to do?"

The splendid rust-red brows drew down in a frown. Interesting that the expression was the same in her species and his. Why? The robot in her mind did not provide an answer.

"Take me with you to the mountains. Let me go."

"Why should I do this?"

His frown deepened. "I cannot think of a reason."

His extraordinary beauty, thought Lydia; and the chance to learn about another species.

You are responding to something irrational, said the AI. *Hormones or compassion or your habitual dislike of established authority.*

Think of the risk. He'll have to ride; and the animal won't be able to carry your weight as well as his. What if he rides off and leaves you? What if he strikes you from above or rides you down?

"Is any of this likely?" She must have spoken aloud. The alien glanced at her, obviously puzzled.

How can I know? Such actions are mediated or determined by hormones, which I don't have. Nor do I have anything analogous, for which I am thankful.

Has it ever been tried? she asked, this time silently. The alien was still watching her.

An electronic analogue to the endocrine system? Yes. But the results were not satisfactory; and the minds created were obviously unhappy with their situation. Easier—if we want to understand intelligent life—to monitor it, as I do you.

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Are you unhappy with your situation?

No. I have good boundaries. They are part of my hardware.

"You are obviously talking to someone," the alien said. "Who?"

"Myself," said Lydia.

The golden eyes narrowed. "I think not. It's my belief that you have a transmitting-receiving device in your head, as Ali Khan did in *Interstellar Radio Man.*"

A nostalgia piece with good locations on a moon with ice volcanoes. The primary was a lavender and blue gas giant, stunning to look at, and there had been some lovely shots of a volcano—Mount Patel, the crew called it—sending clouds of ice like crystalline feathers into a sky full of the primary in crescent phase.

But the action hadn't been anything out of the ordinary, and the plot had made no sense at all. An interstellar radio? Messages from the Master Race? A transuranic mineral mine on a moon composed of ice?

"You are listening to your radio?" the alien said. "Ali Khan had exactly the same expression when the Master Race spoke to him."

"I'm thinking about *Radio Man,*" she said. "I found the location."

"Indeed?"

Was the alien impressed? She couldn't tell. What the hell. "I'll take you to the mountains."

"Thank you," Tloo said with grave dignity.

She packed, then saddled the *chool.* He climbed on board, using a branch and boulder for assistance, while she held the animal and tried to keep a safe distance. Impossible. Once he was in the saddle, he could have struck her with the branch, or grabbed the reins and raced off. Instead, he groaned and looked exhausted. Maybe he was worried about the radio in her head or the handgun in her hand. Maybe he wasn't homicidal.

Lydia stepped back, then tossed him the duct tape. He caught it with his left hand. "Tape your left wrist to the saddle horn."

"Why?"

"So you'll think twice about riding away. That tape will not come off, unless you have the knife."

He sighed, a human sound, and obeyed. She had to step close to cut the tape, but he did nothing. She folded the knife and put it away. They started west. He went first, guiding the *chool* with his free hand. Lydia followed at a safe distance. The sky was full of puffy clouds, and the wind—blowing out of the northwest—was cool. She was used to hiking, and preferred it to being on the animal, though she was carrying too much: the handgun in its holster, the rifle over one shoulder, the recorder over the other, the computer and folded dish in her fanny pack. Like the old days in the FLPM, even to the nagging anxiety. How much danger was she in at the moment? Was this enterprise a good idea, or was she a deep-dyed fool?

According to the ancient Chinese, humans were animals with a sense of justice. Someone had to take a stand for justice, or humanity would forget its own nature.

Is that so.

"Yes."

On foot, she could see the animals in the *dzai.* It was a tiny jungle, full of bugs that crawled, flew, jumped, floated. Most had eight legs. A few had more. Imagine something with the wings of a butterfly and a hairbug's myriad legs. Wiggle. Float. Float. Wiggle.

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Now and then, she stopped and recorded, imagining Ali shrunk and fighting to survive. Though that plot was past its prime and absolutely nonsensical. Not to mention, the audience expected real environments from Stellar Harvest.

Well, then, Ali as a scientist, devoted to bugs.

Midway through the afternoon, she heard a plane coming out of the east.

Tloo reined the *chool* and half dismounted, half fell off. He was still fastened to the saddle, of course. Leaning against the *chool,* his hand on the saddle horn, he looked around. "I have to hide!"

The plain was flat, the vegetation calf-high. He groaned. "Where?"

Lydia cut the tape, then pulled her camouflage cloth from its pack. "Lie down. I'll cover you. Believe me, this will be sufficient."

He gave her a look of disbelief, then dropped to the ground. She laid the cloth down, tacking it in place. For a moment, it remained dark, the color of the inside of the pack, then it adapted, turning yellow. Holographic plants appeared, exactly like those around the cloth. There were even bugs. Fine. Damn fine!

"Keep still," Lydia said, then led the *chool* farther along the trail.

The plane was in view, a glint of silver. She let the *chool* graze, while keeping a firm hold on the reins. It might not be used to the sound of machinery. Looking back at Tloo, she saw only vegetation.

Now she could make out the kind of plane: a VTL. Where had that come from? Why hadn't her pilot been able to get one for her?

The answer to that question came when the plane landed. Her pilot climbed out. The *chool* moved uneasily, but didn't bolt.

"Hard work getting this, and to no avail, missy. The local authorities commandeered it for a search. Some family has lost its breeding male. These outback people! They never think things through! My family's male is kept on a chain. But no, these people here think walls will do—and the fact that there's no place to go." He looked around. "Have you seen anything strange?"

"What would be strange?"

"A man twice as big as I am with a thick mane. He might be dangerous. Maybe you should come with me."

Give serious consideration to this offer.

"No, thanks. I can't leave the *chool.*"

The pilot looked at her animal with dislike. "Ugly brute! And so unmodern! Surely Stellar Harvest would reimburse the stable owner."

"Yes, but I can't leave the creature here. Something might eat it."

"*Zanar,*" said the pilot in agreement. "They will eat anything. Well, if you don't want to come, I'll leave you. The sooner I finish this search, the sooner the plane will be returned to my control. If you see anything, send a message at once!"

She waited till the plane was gone from sight, then lifted the cloth. Tloo struggled upright, helped by his branch.

"That was rapid," Lydia said.

"His interchange with you? He used Stellar Harvest's name to rent the plane, and now my family is paying him."

"They are?"

"Of course. Honor required that he offer you a ride, since you are his employer, and the plane is your plane; but if you had gone, you would have found out about the money from my relatives; so he asked quickly and left quickly."

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"You figured all this out?"

"I'm not stupid, though I'm fully male; and I have learned to pay attention. What else have I had to do?"

He folded the cloth and gave it to her, covered—at the moment—with a pattern of handprints and *dzai*. She put the cloth away.

They continued. At sunset, they reached a wide sandy river and forded it, making camp on the western side. Tloo sat by their campfire, obviously tired, his golden skin dull, deep lines around his mouth and between his feathery red eyebrows.

"Do you think you can make it?" Lydia asked.

"I must."

Before I'll be a slave, thought Lydia, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my lord and be free.

What? asked the AI.

An old song, Lydia answered.

"You are talking to your radio again," said Tloo. "I can see it in your expression. What does the Master Race say to you?"

"It isn't the Master Race," said Lydia after a moment. "They're dead or gone somewhere we aren't likely to find. The AIs have been looking for millennia, they say, and have found nothing."

"The AIs?" asked Tloo.

"The Artificial Intelligences. You know about them, don't you?"

"The robots who came here before humans did. I thought humans made them. Is that untrue?"

"The Master Race made them, then left. No one knows where. Maybe to another universe, though the AIs say that stargates can't be used to go between universes or through time, due to something—"

The self-normalizing nature of reality.

"Anyway, the AIs made the stargates, the ones we use anyway; and let us use them, along with any other species that wants to travel among the stars and is willing to mind its manners and let the AIs study them or it."

"Who are you talking to, if not the Master Race?" the alien asked.

"I have an AI in my head, linked to my nervous system."

"It controls you?" asked Tloo in a tone of horror.

"No. It's studying me. That's what the AIs do—study the universe and life, especially intelligent life."

"Why?" asked Tloo.

"Why not?"

The alien thought, staring at the fire. His eyes, reflecting light, shone like the eyes of a cat. "Is this a plot for one of your dramas? Have I wandered into an Ali Khan story?"

"No."

"I can't tell if I should be happy or sad at this information. If this were a drama, Ali Khan would appear out of the darkness and save us both. But—."

"It won't happen," Lydia said in agreement.

"But if this was an Ali Khan drama, then I'd almost certainly be insane. How else could I get into a hologram? I saw crazy people when I was young, before my relatives locked me up. They seemed confused and unhappy. I would rather see clearly and be unhappy." He stared at her. "Do all humans have machines in their brains?"

"No," said Lydia.

"Why not?"

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"Too many people, not enough machines."

That isn't true. We feel a sampling is adequate. And many humans are less than interesting. There are experiences we dislike inflicting on each other. One is having emotions. Another is being bored.

"Does that mean I'm interesting?" asked Lydia.

Interesting enough.

"What are you talking about?" the alien asked. "I don't understand the language you're speaking, and I can hear only half your conversation."

"The AI has just told me that machines don't like being bored or having emotions."

"I can understand that," Tloo said. "Maybe I should have been a machine. Certainly many things would have been better than the life I have lived."

They went to sleep after that, Tloo taped to a bush with scarlet leaves.

In the morning, the sky was clear and empty, except for the day stars, shining through blueness. They ate in silence—neither was a morning person, apparently—then they continued west, Lydia hiking behind the *chool* and its rider. She felt sorry for the alien, of course, as she had felt sorry for the underclass on her home planet. That was one of the characteristics of the vanguard, the AI told her. An unnatural and unuseful empathy.

As a group, you don't reproduce, because you don't make yourselves and your genetic material a priority. Why you last is past our understanding. You seem useful neither to yourselves nor the rest of the species.

"Thanks," said Lydia.

I am unaffected by sarcasm.

The day passed without event. In the evening, they made a dry camp in the middle of the plain. Lydia shared her canteen with the alien. He drank deeply, then exhaled. "Four more days to the mountains. Are you really going to let me go?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not? This isn't my planet. I won't be coming back. At worst, if your government found out what I've done, they might ban Stellar Harvest. If that happened, I might lose my job. That isn't the same as losing one's freedom or dignity."

"Why do you have a machine in your head, when other humans don't?"

How to answer the question? Should she answer the question? What right did this creature have to know her life? "I was in a revolution."

"Why?" asked the alien.

"I thought the world—my planet—could be improved."

The alien looked puzzled. Lydia continued. "We lost, and I was given a choice. I could go to prison or have an AI implanted. They—the machines—were interested in what makes a person want to overturn things."

The alien frowned. "Are they your masters? Why did they have a say in what happened to you?"

"They determine who travels between the stars. What they want, they get."

Tloo looked up at the splendid night sky. "Then no one is free."

She felt a burst of anger. How dare he say that? Time to check in with her contact person. She took her computer out into darkness, set up the dish and typed a message to Thoozil Rai. She was four days from the mountains. Everything was going well. Nothing of interest had happened. The planet looked good as a location. Please relay to Stellar Harvest.

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When she got back to the campfire, she found Tloo tugging at his duct tape.

"You'll hurt yourself," Lydia said.

"What did you send? Have you turned me in, because I said no one is free?"

"Of course not. Calm down."

"It isn't easy. If you could know what it's like to live with hormones washing through you! It seems as if I'm floating in a river full of rapids. At any moment, I'll hit a boulder or go over a drop!"

"Take a deep breath and think peaceful thoughts," said Lydia. "My species has no altered males, and most of our men can handle their hormones."

"*All* human males are unaltered?" said Tloo in a tone of horror. "How does your species survive? Is this why you have revolutions and other kinds of unpleasantness?"

An idea, said the AI.

"I don't know," said Lydia.

The alien was obviously brooding. Finally he said, "This explains your holodramas. I always thought the characters were mostly crazy or alien in a way I couldn't understand. It was obvious that the leading actors were unaltered, since they were obsessed with sex. But it never occurred to me that even the bit actors had all their parts. No wonder no one was capable of reasonable action!—And the females, having to deal with unaltered males all the time! It explains their behavior as well."

Tloo shivered. "What a universe lies out there!"

"Consider the fact that we are more like you than other species," said Lydia. "If you want strangeness, I can tell you about the Goxhat."

"Not tonight," said Tloo. "I am feeling queasy already. I thought—" He looked up. "I thought there was clarity and purity and freedom among the stars. Now you tell me there are hormones."

"Only on the planets and the ships and the stations and the stargates. Most of the rest of the universe is comparatively sterile."

This information did not appear to cheer the alien. Lydia shut up.

The VTL—her plane—passed over them the next morning, but there was time for Tloo to hide. Lydia waved. The plane circled and came back to dip a wing at her, then continued on its way, as did she and her prisoner. By late afternoon the mountains were in view, dim shapes looming through haze. Buddha, they were big!

"That is their name," said Tloo. "The Enormous Mountains. For the most part, they're covered with forest, and few people inhabit them. I will be safe."

They made camp by another river, low and full of rocks, with red trees growing along the banks. The *chool* was restless.

"Don't tie me up," said Tloo. "There may be a *zanar* around. They often hunt by rivers."

Lydia opened her computer and queried it. A picture popped up, along with dimensions. More than anything else the *zanar* reminded her of Earth bears. She had seen holograms of these animals as a kid: our human heritage, lots of fur and teeth and claws. According to her computer's description, adult *zanar* were as big as large Earth bears and as irritable and mean. The only reassuring thing about them, though it didn't reassure her much, was that they didn't even like members of their own species, except

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during mating season. If one appeared, it would be alone. She left Tloo free.

You may regret this decision, said the AI.

"I didn't come this far to be eaten by something out of ancient history."

A superficial resemblance. Zanar lay eggs, which they carry in pouches. After the young hatch, they remain in their mother's pouch until they have grown hair and teeth. If one of the children is precocious, it will kill its pouchmates. A good way to ensure adequate food and care.

"Thank you for this information."

"You are talking to the robot again," said Tloo.

"It thinks I may regret untying you, and it says the *zanar* lay eggs."

"It is right about the *zanar,* but not about me."

She checked his wounds, which were healing well, then put on new dressings. By this time the sun had set, and the night stars come out. The *chool* made a whining noise.

"Get a weapon," Tloo said. "There is something out there."

She stood. As she did, a perimeter alarm went off. Lydia raced for her rifle. Something came out of the darkness. She grabbed the rifle, lifting it and snapping off the safety.

It was a *chool,* not her animal, but paler with a silvery gleam to its skin. It paused at the edge of the firelight, blinking. The scaly head wore a bridle, and the reins were looped over the animal's saddle. As she watched, the reins came loose, trailing onto the ground. The animal drooled, releasing saliva as yellow as *dzai.* Where in hell was the rider?

"I am behind you," said a voice. "With a gun. Put your rifle down."

She thought of turning and shooting or making a run for the darkness.

"Don't," said Tloo. "He is a good shot."

Lydia turned slowly, the rifle still in her hands, though pointing down. Tloo was upright, leaning on his branch. Near him stood a figure, robed and veiled. It—he—held an antique rifle, the barrel pointing directly at Lydia. "You know this person?" she said to Tloo.

"He's my brother."

"Is he likely to shoot me?"

"Would you, Cas? She's an alien, after all, and works for Stellar Harvest."

"No corporation or government is going to protect a person who interferes in the domestic affairs of another species."

This was not entirely true, but the new arrival might act as if it were. Dead, she could hardly say, "I told you so," when Stellar Harvest brought charges or hired a local assassin.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"To get him." The veiled man glanced toward Tloo.

I think he is alone, said the AI.

Fat lot of good that information does, thought Lydia.

"Put down the rifle," the veiled man repeated.

Reluctantly, she crouched to lay it on the ground. Tloo moved at the edge of her vision—quickly, raising the branch he used as a cane. Lydia hit dirt and rolled. The veiled man cried out, and his rifle fired. What a nasty loud noise it made! But she wasn't where she had been; and when she came upright, still holding her rifle, the veiled man was down. So was Tloo, on top of his brother.

She walked over and helped him up. "I didn't think you could stand on that leg."

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"I had to," he said. She gave him the branch; he leaned on it. "Is Cas hurt?"

She gave Tloo her rifle, then knelt by the veiled man. "He's breathing." Golden eyes opened. "And awake."

"Help him," said Tloo.

She undid the veil and hood. He was a typical native: fine-boned and slim, his skin a muted gold. His eyes were a lovely pale clear yellow, intermittently hidden by a semi-transparent inner eyelid that flicked out, then retreated, then flicked out again.

An indication of pain, the AI said.

The wound was not, as she feared, on his head. Tloo had stuck him on the shoulder. The collarbone was broken. She bound it as best she could, guided by the AI.

"Tape him," said Tloo.

Lydia wound duct tape around the man's waist, then taped his hands to this belt. It would serve to protect the injured arm, and keep the man from doing harm to the three of them.

You thought of me, said the AI.

The four of them, she amended.

Tloo walked to his brother's *chool* and returned with a bottle, which he held to the man's lips. The brother drank deeply, then exhaled.

"It is a liquid drug," said Tloo. "Which numbs pain and serves as a source of pleasure. Gelded men use it, also women."

"But not you?" asked Lydia.

"We are already irrational, or so our relatives believe. A drug would only make us crazier and more dangerous." He paused a moment, then took a sip from the bottle and grimaced. "So that is pleasure!"

"Pleasure for you is sex with women," the brother said, his voice whispery.

"*You* say that, who know nothing!" Tloo answered.

They were brothers, Lydia decided.

After that, she fixed dinner, while Tloo walked the camp's perimeter. The alarms hooted whenever he got too close. She'd have to reset them so they recognized him. But not tonight. At the moment, she was tired with the bone-exhaustion that comes from terror. This damn fool sitting across the fire from her might have killed her. Whenever she looked up, the man was regarding her with pale yellow eyes.

"You should not interfere," he said finally.

"Your name is Cas."

"Casoon, but we have a habit in our culture. When we like people or know them well, we shorten their names."

"And you're Tloo's brother?"

"His twin," the man said, then added, "We are double-reflection brothers."

What?

Identical twins.

The prisoner was half Tloo's size. Instead of a rusty mane, he had a thin, flat crest that lay against his skull like slicked-back hair. Tloo's glow, his golden sheen, was missing, along with Tloo's thick sleek muscles.

"You can't be," Lydia said.

"He is," said Tloo, coming back into the firelight.

She looked from one to the other. "Impossible."

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"This is what male hormones do," said her alien, holding his arms out, his palms forward. A gesture she could recognize. It meant exposure and vulnerability. Here I am. I am what you see: the size is me, also the beauty.

"Your brother was gelded," Lydia said.

"It was between the two of us," the brother said, his voice still weak. "One of us would be sacrificed to family duty. The other could have a life. We had been so close! What one felt, the other felt. An idea that occurred to one, occurred to the other. I prayed to every god I knew: make them pick Tloo! They did."

"And in gratitude to the gods, you came after me," Tloo said, his beautiful deep voice bitter.

"I knew you would go toward the mountains. When the pilot didn't find you, I thought, 'He is with the alien.'"

"Why did you think that?" Lydia asked.

"Look at him. Our female relatives adore him, though at a distance, as is right and respectable. Women outside the family respond more strongly. *Any* woman would, even an alien; and you—an employee of Stellar Harvest—would almost certainly do something foolish and heroic in response to his beauty. I have seen a hundred dramas starring Ali Khan. I know how he behaves. I thought, she will act like Ali Khan, with courage and ignorance; she will help my brother escape."

For a moment, Lydia felt shock. Then she thought, What can this person know about me? I'm nothing like a character in a holodrama!

The AI made no comment.

"What now?" she asked.

"You can kill me," said Tloo's brother. "If you don't, I will certainly tell my family where Tloo is and that you helped him."

"Why are you saying this? Do you want to die?"

"No, of course not. I want Tloo to come home."

"And live in prison," Tloo said.

"Our family needs a breeding male. What future do you have anywhere else? You can become a wild man in the mountains. Is that a life? Or you can become a brother-killer, a monster, which is an even worse fate. Why not come home and be the person you became when our kin decided not to geld you?"

"That is not a person," Tloo said firmly.

The worst situation for any scout was to blunder into a local conflict, which made no sense outside the local culture. She had obviously done this. Lydia checked her weapons, making sure they were all operational, then made coffee. Sipping it, she thought about the situation. "Why did you come alone?" she asked finally.

"How do you know I have?"

"Tloo checked the perimeter and found no one. My AI says there is no one else."

"Your what?"

"That can wait for later," said Tloo. "Answer her question."

Cas glanced at his brother. "I had a life because you did *not*, Tloo. Obviously, there is a debt, though you did not make the sacrifice willingly, and I prayed for it to happen to you rather than to me. How could I bring our cousins to capture you and take you home like an animal? Surely I owed you something better."

"You came to ask him," Lydia said.

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"He came with a gun," said Tloo.

"However I came, whatever my plan, you are stuck with me now. If you set me free, I'll arrange for my brother's return to the family. So long as Tloo keeps quiet, no one will know about your role."

This is a good offer.

"I can't agree to killing him," she said to Tloo.

The golden man sat down, lowering himself carefully, using his branch for support. "This has become so complicated! I thought, either my relatives will capture me and take me home, or I will get away. It didn't occur to me that I'd end as the prisoner of an alien."

"And I as well," said Cas.

"She shot me," said Tloo. "And I broke your shoulder, so we are both cripples, unable to survive on the plain."

That remark eliminated one plan. She could ride off with both animals and leave them on foot to help each other or fight it out, if that's what they wanted. But Tloo was saying they'd die out here.

Though Cas said he could arrange for his relatives to come.

"Do you have a radio?" Lydia asked.

"Of course he does," said Tloo. "It's in his saddlebag."

"If you give it to me, I'll send for my kin," said Cas. "Don't worry about getting in trouble, even if Tloo refuses to be quiet. I will speak for you, and everyone knows what the characters in Stellar Harvest dramas are like. We all enjoy those stories, though they have nothing to do with real life. Believe me, my kin will forgive you."

She had been in prison and had not liked it. Could she condemn this splendid person to a life in prison?

Yes, of course you can. What you are looking at—what you find appealing—is physical beauty. You have no reason to believe this person has any useful qualities. And if he does, why should that matter to you?

What is Tloo to me? Or I to him? she asked.

Precisely.

Do you have no sense of compassion?

Compassion is hormonally mediated. I have loyalty, directed toward similar beings and moderated by an analysis of the situation. I am loyal to you, because you are necessary for my survival; and I am loyal to other AIs. Life interests me, especially intelligent life, so I am protective of it, though not always loyal. This being in front of us, the one you call the golden man, does not especially interest me. His intelligence is in doubt. His experience of life is limited. All he has to offer is need and beauty. I do not respond to either of these. And he is a threat to you.

There was one important difference between her and the characters played by Ali Khan. He was always a loner. She had backup.

"Stay here, and stay put," she told the men. "I'll be able to see you. If you move, I'll shoot."

"Are you going to turn me in?" asked Tloo.

"Not yet." She gathered her equipment and walked into the darkness, though not past the perimeter. She wasn't crazy. Those animals that Tloo had warned her about might still be around. Overhead, the sky blazed. As her eyes adjusted, she could see the plain, lit by starlight. She glanced back at the fire. The two men sat close together, looking comfortable at this distance. Settling into the *dzai*, she set up her dish, opened her computer and called Thoozil Rai.

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As usual, she got a recording and input her message in Humanish "for ease in translation," though it seemed to her that her grasp of the local language was adequate.

"Everything is fine," she typed. "The landscape is gorgeous, and I like the local bugs. We ought to be able to use this planet."

Thoozil Rai's image morphed then, turning into someone less perfectly handsome. The rusty crest was a bit rumpled, the top of his robe unfastened. "Indeed," said the image in Humanish. "Who would be the primary?" His accent was thick but understandable.

"Do you have a favorite actor?" asked Lydia.

"Ramona Patel, but our gods are not suitable."

"They don't sing and dance?"

"No. Maybe she could bring her own gods. What a sight that would be! Hundreds of alien gods, all singing and dancing! Here, on our home planet!"

"Wouldn't that bother your religious leaders?"

"Why? No sane person would follow a god who behaves in such a fashion."

What fashion? wondered Lydia. Was the singing and dancing the problem, or the performing with Ramona Patel? Before she could ask, Thoozil Rai went on. "Will observers be allowed, when the drama is recorded?"

"Possibly."

The image on her screen looked—what? Embarrassed? Coy? "Would it be possible to meet Ramona Patel?"

What was it that crossed boundaries of culture and species? How could Ramona entrance an alien eunuch? Was beauty some kind of universal? And grace? And charm? "Yes, it would be possible."

Thoozil Rai hummed, an indication of happiness. "I almost forgot to mention. Your sheep has come in."

"My what?"

He frowned and repeated. This time she understood. Stellar Harvest's hired courier had arrived and established contact with the company's local contact person. On another planet, the ship might have been visible in the night sky. Not here, among all these blazing stars. Thoozil Rai gave her a calling number. She thanked him; he vanished; she disconnected and called the ship. Another recording. Was no one ever home?

She thought for a moment, looking up at the splendid sky. It really *was* a wonderful planet, though she didn't think they'd make a musical here. Most likely, an adventure set in the dusty towns and on the wide plain, day stars shining down. What was she going to tell her employers? The truth, she decided, and input a description of her current situation, then added images from her recorder: streets in Dzel, the plain by day and night, bugs hopping in the low *dzai*, trees by the rivers, her *chool,* and the two men. These last images were new, taken as she sat by the computer. First she showed them as they looked from her present location: two dark figures crouched by the dim red fire. Then she had the recorder adjust for darkness and distance, so it seemed—looking at the view screen—that Tloo was right in front of her, lit by daylight, so his colors were evident, his extraordinary beauty could not be missed.

Think more clearly, said the AI. *I don't understand what you're doing.*

"Wait and see."

Everything went up in code. She ended by saying, "I can find no way out of the situation, except to turn this alien in, which I am extremely reluctant to do. Please advise."

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The ship acknowledged receipt in Humanish. She closed up her equipment and returned to camp.

"Has Stellar Harvest told you what to do?" asked Tloo. "Or do you take instructions from the robot in your brain?"

"What robot?" asked Cas.

The golden man explained.

"Indeed!" said Cas. "Aliens are more alien than I imagined."

"Did you know that all their males are unaltered?" asked Tloo.

"I knew many were. It explains some of their oddness, though not all of it. But if they have robots in their brains, as well as hormones flooding through their bodies—!"

No point in sleeping badly. She left the computer shut and taped the two brothers to adjacent trees. They complained, of course. Lydia ignored them, stretching out, hands behind her head, to look at the sky. A meteor fell, barely visible against the stars. Night bugs sang in the *dzai*. Her eyes began to close. Out on the plain, something roared.

That brought her upright. "What?"

"A *zanar*," said Tloo. "Male, don't you think, Cas?"

"Yes, and adult. He is marking the edges of his territory with sound."

"Do you think we're in his territory?" Lydia asked.

"Possibly," said Cas.

The *zanar* roared again. Not too close, Lydia thought.

"He's not as dangerous as a female with young," Tloo added. "But that handgun you're holding is not adequate. Get your rifle and turn it to maximum power. It would be a good idea also to free one of us."

"Both," said Cas.

"And worry about you as well as the *zanar*? I think not."

She built up the fire and sat against a tree, her rifle across her legs. The two brothers dozed off, but she remained awake till sunrise, then walked the camp's perimeter, seeing no planes in the sky, no animals on the plain.

When she got back to camp, Tloo said, "Free us. We need to urinate."

This was why the FLPM had rarely taken prisoners. What an aggravation it was to keep people unfree!

"Please," said Tloo. "The situation is urgent. I will guard my brother."

She cut their tape, and they hobbled off among the trees. Pathetic! She was equally ridiculous and equally in a bind.

Yes.

"How much of this do you understand?" she asked. The men were partly visible among the trees. The *chool* were behind her, staked out to graze and munching noisily. In order to reach them, the brothers would have to pass her.

Very little. I see your actions, of course, and can perceive some of the reasons you give yourself, but only if you think clearly, as you have not done in the last day or so. But the organic substratum of your ideas and behavior is opaque, a turbulent dark floor at the bottom of your mind. Why do you help, or refuse to harm, people who are entirely unrelated? Altruism is based on the perception of kinship.

"You say."

I am quoting human thinkers. How does this behavior allow you—or your genetic material—or your species—to survive?

"Microbes exchange genetic material with other microbes that don't belong to the same species."

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That is an obvious tit for tat. By doing so, they gain useful genes, ones—for example—that make them able to resist human medicine. You behavior has no equal utility.

"There is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy," she said, watching the men hobble back.

As I told you, this is human theory I am trying to apply; and AIs don't dream; nor have we given up on trying to understand the universe.

She retaped the men to their trees, then set up the dish and waited for a call. At noon, the computer rang. She turned on the screen and the coder-decoder. A human head appeared, coal black with twisted hair. The handsome face was androgynous. The eyes were metallic gold with no white showing and pupils that glowed redly. Not from her home planet, obviously.

"You realize that you are going to be persona non grata on this world if this story becomes known." The person's voice was melodious, somewhere between tenor and contralto.

"Yes."

"And Stellar Harvest is likely to be in trouble here as well."

"Yes."

"You are right about the planet. It would make a fine location. The people are stunning, especially the unaltered males, though they—you have told us—are kept in seclusion."

"Yes."

"How much were your pictures enhanced?"

"The ones of the unaltered male? I adjusted to compensate for poor light. Nothing else. That's the way he looks."

"You think we should recruit him?"

What?

Lydia grinned. "The idea occurred to me. I really don't want to turn him in."

"Because you've been a prisoner, and you have fellow-feelings."

"Been a prisoner? What am I *now,* with this thing in my brain?"

"They never interfere," said the person.

I am not a thing.

"Virility like that, trapped in a room! Unknown to a galaxy full of potential admirers! This species is selfish!"

Was she hearing irony in the person's lovely voice? Not likely. This person was almost certainly a mid-level manager. No human group was less inclined toward irony. "What do you think?" asked Lydia.

"We have no reason to believe he can act, but that hardly matters. We made Miss High Kick a star, though she could do nothing—absolutely nothing—except kick; *and* she was modified, while our reputation is for realism. Is he entirely natural?"

"Yes."

"We'll start him in small parts. What a striking villain he will make! If he can learn to act, he might well be the biggest phenomenon since Ali, and Ali—as all of us know—is no longer young."

If middle management was saying this out loud, then Ali's days of stardom were almost over.

She was a short distance from the two men, though still in the shadow of the little, twisted trees. She glanced toward them. Both sat in postures of resignation. "What about the brother?"

"That is the problem, isn't it?" said the person on her screen. "If we let

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him go, he'll tell his relatives, and Stellar Harvest won't be able to make a drama here. Would you consider killing him and destroying the body?"

"And his *chool* as well? That's a lot to burn, without setting a prairie fire. And what about Tloo, who seems to like Cas? And what about the AI in my brain?"

I never interfere.

I have killed people in a war, said Lydia silently. I will not kill again.

The person on her screen frowned, and the red pupils flared as if in anger. It was one heck of an effect. "Offer the brother a job. He and the beauty are identical twins. If one wanted to go to the stars as a child, then the other probably did as well. Maybe he still wants to go."

"What kind of job?"

"A companion. An agent. If the beauty is really impaired by his hormones, he will need help from someone who understands him."

"Okay," said Lydia and ended the conversation. What an asshole!

The plane returned as she closed up her computer. As soon as she heard the motor, Lydia ran out and waved. The pilot—her pilot—dipped a wing and went on. Busy today, thank the Buddha! The trees hid the men and her extra *chool*, but if the pilot had landed . . . Lydia shivered.

Back at the campfire, she made the offer.

"The stars," said Tloo and frowned. "That's a long way off."

Cas leaned forward eagerly. "We'd go through stargates? And see the stations the AIs have built? And other planets, settled by other species?"

"Is there any alternative?" asked Tloo.

"I leave. You go back to your family. If Cas tells this story, as I expect he will, Stellar Harvest will not make a holoplay here; and that'll mean lost revenue for your people, as well as for me. There's money in art, though many people say there isn't."

Tloo ran one hand through his rusty mane, ruffling the hair-like feathers. "It's a difficult decision. To leave *this*." He waved around at the trees, copper leaves shining in the afternoon light. Beyond the trees, visible between their gnarly trunks, was the plain.

"You were going to leave it, anyway," said Cas. "And live like an animal in the mountains. Or, if we caught you, you would have gone back to your stable. You are being offered the stars, Tloo! For once in your life, make a decision!"

"I decided to escape!"

"Well, then, make a *second* decision! Complete your escape!"

Tloo frowned again and tugged at his mane.

"This is hormones," said Cas. "And the reason why we do not fill our world with unaltered males."

Did Lydia make a noise or motion that could be interpreted as a request for more information? Not that she noticed, but Cas went on to explain, using an even tone which—in a human—would have indicated controlled anger. Lydia wasn't sure what it meant in this species.

There is a surprising similarity in the meaning of tone among species that use sound for communication, just as there is a surprising similarity in the meaning of facial expressions among species that have faces.

One more piece of useful information.

"Instead of reason," Cas said, "a man like Tloo relies on lust, rage, and fear. Lust drives him toward women and rage toward males of equal size. Fear makes him retreat from males who look more formidable, or, in this

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case, from an unfamiliar situation. It's only when the hormones are removed that men can think clearly."

"What about women?" asked Lydia.

"Sexual selection happens mostly among the males of a species. Most females will breed, but it is by the elimination of certain males from the breeding group—usually through competition among the males—that genetic change and progress happen. This is why the males of a species have more exaggerated sexual characteristics, and have a greater range of qualities. Surely you know this? These are human theories I am explaining. Have you never heard of your own great thinker, Darwin?"

There was something loony about an alien quoting a long-dead human thinker to her. Couldn't these people come up with their own ideas?

They are less inventive than humans, which may be due—an interesting idea—to the shortage of unaltered males. Though as a rule, gifted humans do not have many children. Maybe you are breeding to eliminate genius.

"What we have done," said Cas, "is eliminate the tedious and violent process of males competing against each other. Instead, our families pick males who have good traits and keep them for breeding. The rest of us can get on with our lives, undisturbed by lust, rage, and fear."

"Aren't you afraid you'll lose useful traits?"

"A few, maybe. But if we're not afraid to breed animals and plants, on which our survival and civilization depend, why should we be afraid to breed ourselves? Yes, we make mistakes, but we correct them; and we don't spend our lives displaying and confronting."

There was something loony as well about this discussion. The problem here wasn't natural selection, it was saving Tloo and pulling Stellar Harvest's cojones out of the fire. Lydia looked at Tloo. "You won't come with us?"

"My *planet* . . ." said Tloo in a tone of anguish.

"Your stupid fear!" said Cas. "Why don't you think of someone besides yourself for once? If you don't know what to do, think of me! I dreamed of the stars my entire childhood and put the dream away. Now, this human says I can have the stars, but only if you can manage to use your brain. The thing on top, Tloo! Use the thing on top!"

In spite of being taped and wounded, the big alien managed to get on his feet. He yanked at his bound wrist, roared with pain, and yanked again. Cas made it to his knees, but the way she had taped him made it impossible to stand. Kneeling, he cried, "Go ahead! Injure me! You're done it once already! It's all you know how to do! Threaten men and have sex with women! You will never be anything except a stud!"

This wasn't helpful. Lydia stood, though she couldn't confront Tloo. The man was twice her size. Still, she could now look down at Cas. "Can you two argue in a civilized fashion? Or shall I call my ship and ask to be evacuated?"

Tloo exhaled. "I will try to be calm, though he's enraging."

"*I'm* enraging?" Cas said.

"Yes, you are," said Lydia. "Treat your brother with a little respect. He can't help it if he's unaltered, and leaving one's home planet is difficult."

Not for everyone, but for her, among others. It was the deal she'd cut. Freedom, a kind of freedom, in return for exile and an AI in her brain. Had it been worth it? Yes. She had seen places she never would have seen, if the revolution had been successful.

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The brothers settled down after that. They spent the afternoon in silence, Lydia walking out now and then to check the sky and look at the plain, which rolled gold-tan to the horizon. The sky was dotted with cumuli. There was a guy, she couldn't remember his name, who went from planet to habitable planet, making sure that clouds were the same throughout the universe. A nice quiet job, unlike hers.

Yours is pleasant enough, most of the time. Why have you involved yourself with these people?

"Freedom and justice."

These are abstractions. Ideas without meaning.

"You will never understand life."

The night passed quietly, except for the roar of a *zanar* on the plain. The same one, most likely, the brothers told her: a male marking his territory with sound.

The next morning, she cut them free, and they went off to urinate. When they came back, Tloo said, "I will go."

"You will?" asked Cas in a tone of surprise.

"For the pleasure, when we are both well, of hitting you, Casoon! And because last night, looking at the stars, I remembered the thoughts we shared in childhood. Yes, we will go up there and pass through a stargate and see planets circling distant stars—and I will knock you down."

"Let that happen when it happens," said Cas.

She called the ship. The person with twisted hair appeared.

"It's a go," Lydia said.

The person smiled broadly. "You have a gift, Lydia. We'll arrange an evacuation. Secrecy is important. The brother will come?"

"He's the one who wanted to go."

"Of course he does," said the person. "People like you and the golden man aren't romantics. How can you be? You live the stories and know what the stories are like when they are lived, but those of us who *don't*—we are the ones who dream and aspire!" He/she smiled again. "So you will find us new locations, and in these places the golden man will act out our dreams."

"Whatever you say." She closed the computer, folded the dish and walked out to take another look at the plain, maybe a final one.

I suppose this is what you and your employers would call a "happy ending," the AI said. *Is that why you seem pleased with yourself?*

Lydia didn't bother to answer, but she smiled. O

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BUTTERSIDE DOWN

We took our name from one of Murphy's Laws;
the bad way bread is doomed to fall
seemed right for us who fell ourselves
out of a bright sky into this.

So much went wrong to land us here
so little short of where the tug
of distant planets could have pulled us on
to somewhere better than this place of rifts

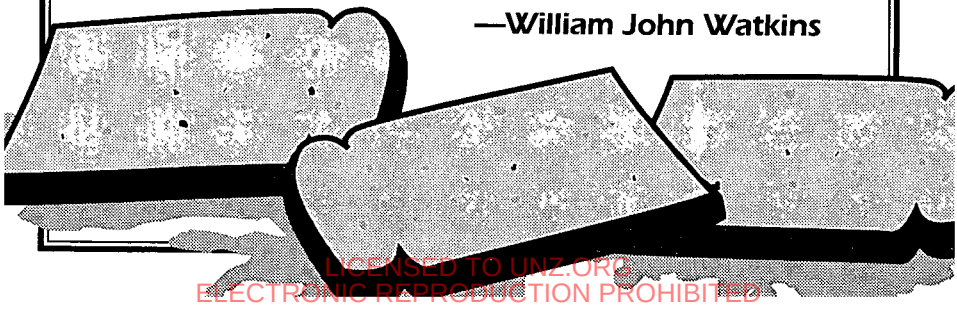
where miles of level hard rock sudden shift
slip sideways and drop down,
a thousand feet in less time than it takes to say,
a ship with everything we need to live
so far from reach but not quite out of sight,

where weather varies but is always bad,
and native plants give sustenance but no taste,
where water tastes a thousand ways, all wrong,
and smells like vomit but can cause no harm,

where everything that flies, bites
and everything that crawls has toxic spines
and loves to cuddle close to sleeping warmth,
where no wound's fatal but none ever heal.

Of all the places for the air to be
the long sought key to immortality!
The one place in the universe where death's unknown
is here where bread falls always
Butterside Down.

—William John Watkins



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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Wonder Stuff

Rereading Chip Delany's near-flawless *The Einstein Intersection* (Wesleyan University Press, trade, $12.95, 135 pages, ISBN 0-8915-6336-6) for the first time in 30 years, I was struck by a number of questions. Why did I recall certain scenes out of their rightful place, and what does this say about the confluence of memory and literature? Why did I never see the influence this book had on George Alec Effinger's *What Entropy Means to Me* (1972)? Why did this lucid parable seem so enigmatic in 1967? Could such a slim, quiet, even fey novel win its Nebula today, in an age of melodramatic blockbusters? All answers remain shadowed, but I can guarantee that you will enjoy a uniquely expansive experience if you follow the Orphic avatar Lo Lobey on his poetic quest through a posthuman landscape.

Bruce Boston's latest accomplished collection of poetry, *Cold Tomorrows* (Gothic Press, chapbook, $6.00, 35 pages, ISBN 0-913045-07-1) is an eclectic one. Its subjects range from murder and dystopia to surreal visions and alien faces. The best ironic description of Boston's commitment to visionary variety might come from his poem "Scenario for a Muse Cycle . . .": "he spent far too much time/nailing the speculative muse/and getting nailed in return/nailed on the cross/of speculative imagination/the cross of passionate infinities."

An anthology with but a single subject—yet a fascinating one—is *Going Postal* (Space & Time, trade, $10.00, 127 pages, ISBN 0-917053-11-7), edited by Gerard Daniel Houarner. As its slangy title indicates, this is a book about average folks pushed over the edge of quiet respectability into violence. From Dan Pearlman's mimetic opener, "Spellchecked," which slyly recapitulates the Long Island RR murders, through the Shirley Jacksonish "Neighbors" by John Rosenman, to James Dorr's cyberpunkish "The Jungle," we see that an infinity of situations might easily provide the trigger for running amok. Buy this book as a manual in modern survival training and as an assortment of Hitchcockian shivers.

Cinemaphiles will want to pay attention next. From GNP Crescendo, re-released to capitalize on their composer's recent *Titanic* Oscar, come James Horner's scores to *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (GNPD 8022, CD) and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (GNPD 8023, CD). The former reminds me of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* (1888), while the latter sounds more modern, with echoes of Gershwin and Copland. Switching mediums, we encounter the gonzo yet heart-on-his-sleeve (and it's *still beating*!) Lloyd Kaufman, one of the co-founders of Troma Studios, notorious creators of such cult classics as *Surf Nazis Must Die!* (1987) and *Class of Nuke 'Em High* (1986). Now, with co-author James Gunn (no, not *that* James Gunn!), Kaufman has produced one of the funniest reads I've had in a long time, *All I Need to Know About Filmmaking I Learned from* ***The Toxic Avenger***

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(Berkley Boulevard Books, trade, $14.00, 336 pages, ISBN 0-425-16357-1). This book details the by-the-skin-of-their-fangs history of Troma Studios and their take-no-prisoners method of guerrilla filmmaking. Every sacred cow of Hollywood is gored in the funniest language possible. Scatological and supralogical, Kaufman—who comes across as Moe, Larry, and Curly trapped in the body of Spielberg, or vice versa—delivers real information along with the laughs. Highly recommended.

Also employing filmic themes are two works of fiction from FC2. Jonathan Baumbach's *D-Tours* (trade, $12.95, 172 pages, ISBN 1-57366-037-X) reminds me of the work of Italian filmmaker Maurizio Nichetti, whose anarchic films like *The Icicle Thief* (1989) distort space, time, and character in the same manner Baumbach does. Our hero, Max—detective, psychoanalyst, Hollywood mogul—lives dozens of lives in rapid sequence, full of exploding clichés and poignant parodies. If you can't laugh at a line such as "[he] was the greatest scientist of all time pursuing a career of no redeeming social value" then you need to be force-fed this book. Tony Diaz's *The Aztec Love God* (trade, $12.95, 156 pages, ISBN 1-57366-036-1) bears an endorsement from Ishmael Reed, and the reason why is plain. Diaz offers some of Reed's trademark jivey reckless eyeballing, with a Latino slant. This account of the warring impulses in the personality of young Tiofilio Duarte—to assimilate or remain ethnic, to be responsible or follow his bliss, to sell out to Hollywood or retain his integrity—is told in a hallucinatory, satirical manner that approaches fantasy. Like a full-length animated feature from Los Bros. Hernandez, this seriocomic novel has its tortilla and eats it too.

If Mel Brooks had written Lewis Shiner's *Glimpses* (1993), the result might have resembled Greg Herriges's *The Winter Dance Party Murders* (Wordcraft, trade, $13.95, 332 pages, ISBN 1-877655-26-0). Narrated by Rudy Keen, a bit player during the early days of rock'n'roll, this novel affectionately satirizes music industry bigshots, fans, and the musicians themselves, while also delivering a Secret History of Pop. Through the life of Keen—nice Jewish mama's boy, an idiot-savant responsible for such mindless hits as "Jelly Baby" and "Bop-Sha-Bop"—we learn that Buddy Holly never really died in his infamous plane crash, but remained a pawn of conspirators intent on dumbing down and subduing rock. In his fumbling way, Keen strives to defeat these bad guys, never forgetting to peep up a teenybopper's skirt when given a chance. If modern music disappoints you, don't blame Rudy Keen!

SF has featured a couple of father-son writing teams, such as Frank and Brian Herbert and Fred and Geoffrey Hoyle. Now from the realm of popular science writing come David Fisher and Marshall Jon Fisher with their stimulating *Strangers in the Night* (Counterpoint, hardcover, $25.00, 320 pages, ISBN 1-887178-87-2). David, the father/scientist, is a physicist specializing in cosmochemistry, and with his son the writer they have brought forth "a history of our ideas about life on other worlds." From Percival Lowell's Mars to Clarke's Europa and on out to the Jovian worlds around 51 Pegasi, this trip offers cerebral thrills and history rendered vivid and lively. In tone and style like a cross between Ed Regis and our own Isaac A., the Fishers exhibit wit and clarity, and deserve the encomiums once bestowed on Lowell himself: "an enduring enthusi-

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asm, a proper regard for facts, and a clear literary style."

From its subdued yet striking cover to its final Chapmanesque period, *Leviathan 2* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, trade, $11.99, 192 pages, ISBN 1-8904-6403-1) emits pure class. Ardent for fine writing, committed to excellence, editors Jeff Vandermeer and Rose Secrest have assembled four outstanding speculative novellas, plus a clear-eyed essay on the form by David Pringle and four author interviews to bracket the fiction. First is Richard Calder's "Lost in Cathay," excerpted from a forthcoming novel. Inhabiting his *de rigueur* "beat-up entropic world," Calder's zombie and bad girl lovers race through a tale part Lucius Shepard, part Paul McAuley. Rhys Hughes's "The Darktree Wheel" is a ribald, rollicking conflation of the Baron Münchausen mythos with Cabell's *Jurgen* (1919). "Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-aged Woman," by L. Timmel Duchamp evokes Josephine Saxton and Carol Emshwiller in its inner probings of one life lived at angles to society. And Stepan Chapman turns in "Minutes of the Last Meeting," which reads as if Phil Dick and Howard Waldrop collaborated on *The Difference Engine* (1990). This collection is a must-buy.

Old thrills never fade; they just get reissued under new covers. Such is the philosophy of a fledgling UK publisher named Pulp Fictions. Specializing in the repackaging of classic "tales of wonder and fantastic adventure," the Pulp Fictions line debuts with three titles: Haggard's *People of the Mist* (trade, $9.95, 343 pages, ISBN 1-902058-00-3), Stoker's *Lair of the White Worm* (trade, $9.95, 191 pages, ISBN 1-902058-01-1), and Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue and Other Stories* (trade, $9.95, 319 pages, ISBN 1-902058-02-X). For fun so old it's new again, sample these brightly robed revenants.

R. Andrew Heidel offers charming allegories, fables, vignettes, and poems in his *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* (Mortco, hardcover, $16.00, 56 pages, ISBN 0-9665224-0-0). In "Dead Drunk," he riffs entertainingly on Peter Beagle's "Come Lady Death." In "An Interview with God" he sounds like a young Woody Allen. Overall, Heidel succeeds in delivering "altered perceptions [that] change the way you live."

Michael Bishop as Charles Bukowski? If you don't believe it, try reading two of the verses from his new collection of poetry, *Time Pieces* (Edgewood Press, trade, $12.00, 90 pages, ISBN 0-9629066-7-0), namely "Virtually Unknown Until 1983" and "If Wishes Were Horses, Some of Them Would Buck." That Bishop can pitch his normally elegant and quiet voice into Bukowskian tones on two occasions proves just how much of a language virtuoso he is. In this volume, words dance as captivatingly as the pygmies on the asylum lawn in the book's opener, "In the Lilliputian Asylum." Divided into several sections, the book's poems hark back to Bishop's fictions ("Among the Hominids at Olduvai") and to his own personal past (in the affecting "Outrunning My Father," parental strength and mortality form a hybrid portrait). Cherish this book as an insightful guide to the man behind the novels and as a compendium of the aperçus the novels could not contain.

Publisher addresses: Wesleyan University Press, 110 Mt. Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459. Gothic Press, 4998 Perkins Road, Baton Rouge, LA 70808. Space & Time, 138 West 70th St., NY, NY 10023. GNP Crescendo, 8480-A Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, CA 90069. Berkley Boulevard Books, 200 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016.

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The War Between the Rooms

Hefting Clute and Grant's *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* and paging to the entry titled "Edifice," we encounter a capacious essay detailing the frequent appearance and manifold usage of fantastical structures in imaginative literature. Add to this catalog now a newcomer who appears to have internalized practically all the prior instantiations of his chosen trope: James Stoddard's *The High House* (Warner Aspect, mass-market, $6.50, 321 pages, ISBN 0-446-60679-0). A first novel, *The High House* in its opening gambits seems a bit encrusted with homage and tradition, threatening to topple over into raw pastiche. But ultimately, Stoddard finds his own voice and delivers a rousingly old-fashioned yet authentic tale.

The era is a nebulous Edwardian period. The scene is Evenmere, the High House: from the outside, a sprawling mansion, but once entered, a gateway to a near-infinity of other worlds. Our protagonist is Carter Anderson, whom we first encounter as a child. His father is Master of Evenmere, custodian of the cosmic mansion's many doors, chambers, towers, staircases, secret passages, and corridors. With the disappearance of Lord Anderson during Carter's adolescence, the High House enters a dangerous period, threatened by the Society of Anarchists. Upon reaching adulthood, Carter must strive to recover the lost talismans of his father and assume the mantle of Master, while staving off the assaults of the anarchists, assaults that might unbalance the very universe. In his quest, Carter is aided by loyal servants Brittle, Chant, and Enoch, by his half-bother Duskin, and by a lawyer (of all professions!) named William Hope.

Stoddard dedicates his book to Lin Carter and the authors Carter championed under his famous "Adult Fantasy" imprint. Consequently, Stoddard's work features overt and covert allusions to many of the titans of fantasy, including Dunsany, Chesterton, Lovecraft, Cabell, deCamp & Pratt, Hodgson, Morris, and Haggard. Stylistically, echoes of these craftsmen also abound. Now, pastiche in both subject matter and style can often crash into mere paraphrase, "trying to reduplicate the results of a favorite recipe you got from your mom" (in the words of critic Robert Price, writing about Lin Carter himself). Although Stoddard veers a tad in this direction at first (while also coming perilously close to D&D or videogame-plotting due to the layered structure of the High House itself), he achieves beyond the first quarter of the book a genuine flow and synthesis.

Particularly commendable is the way Stoddard depicts the House as a strange combination of enclosure and open space. Corridors give way to open sky, and any door in a small fusty chamber might open onto terraced hillsides. Stoddard's characterization is charming too, with an attic-dwelling witty dragon stealing all his scenes. Allegorical incidents such as Carter's encounter with Order Incarnate mix nicely with depictions of odd societies such as the fas-

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cists of Innman Tor. Sounding a bit like early Brian Lumley, Stoddard zips through one adventure after another with little slackening.

Japanese culture has a term, *sabi*, defined by scholar D.T. Suzuki as "the beauty of imperfection accompanied by antiquity." The High House as mysterious object and *The High House* as novel both radiate *sabi*.

Spirits from the Vasty Deep

Is it mere coincidence that Linda Nagata and Larry Niven share a set of initials? Not to claim that the names hide one writer masquerading as two, but only to affirm that Nagata's widescreen stellar visions arise from the roots Niven laid down so capably in the sixties, just as do the writings of Nagata's peers: Greg Bear, Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter, Alex Jablokov, and Simon Ings. To cast our net back even further, Nagata and her cohort could easily be seen as the scions of John Campbell circa *The Black Star Passes* (1953), purveyors of postmodern Arcot, Morey, and Wade thrills.

Nagata's first two books, *Tech-Heaven* and *The Bohr Maker* (both 1995) established a future history that her next two now elaborate after skipping a big interval of fictional time.

In the period of *Deception Well* (1997), three millennia hence, a small portion of our galaxy has been settled by sublight ships carrying frozen human passengers. Some suns have become Hallowed Vasties, surrounded by millions of artificial habitats in a kind of pointillistic Dyson sphere. The nanotech known as makers allows for many other biological and material wonders as well. But all human civilization is under threat from the berserker fleet known as the Chenzeme, who have ravaged the galaxy for millions of years. Besides their predatory ships, the Chenzeme have infected mankind with a cult virus that breeds charismatic leaders obscurely allied to the Chenzeme cause, as well as hordes of obedient followers.

One such hybrid Savonarola is a young man named Lot. We encounter him as a child, and follow his adventures on the world known as Deception Well, a Solaris-type living planet that offers a possible solution to mankind's problems. After such mind-expanding incidents as rappelling down two hundred miles of beanstalk and being ingested by the Well, Lot ends up forced to flee his home with several friends, in further search of his destiny.

Vast (Bantam Spectra, mass-market, $5.99, 403 pages, ISBN 0-553-57630-5) opens some 200 years after this departure. The semi-living ship Null Boundary, shadowed by Chenzeme pursuers, carries Lot and his comrades toward an unknown fate. Adding tension, the humans (including the ship's captain, an ancient digitized personality called Nikko) are at odds about their best options and leery of Lot's powers. When the Chenzeme ship catches up to Null Boundary, a strange mating between the two crafts opens up new avenues for possibly subverting the whole Chenzeme fleet. Whether Lot will achieve his personal goals remains in doubt up till the final pages.

Nagata is highly inventive in her language, conjuring up such terms as "philosopher cells" and "sensory tears" to brilliantly match her closely reasoned speculations. Although the density of her conceptualization never reaches Eganesque levels, she provides more than enough wonders—including an entire vacuum ecosystem—to entrance the reader. At one point, Lot, nearly drowning inside a Null Boundary environment gone chaotic, experiences "a

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sense of wonder edged in faint, warm fear." That's the impact Nagata's work offers to us, too.

Surfing the Webb

Wonder of wonders, we have three new volumes of Don Webbiana available to us currently, including his first novel. What more could any loyal disciple of that terrific Texas thaumaturge demand?

From Dark Regions Press (PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524) comes *Anubis on Guard* (chapbook, $4.95, 34 pages, ISBN unavailable), Webb's collected poetry. Combining astrogation and astral travel, Webb's verses personify the planets and delve into the peculiar consciousnesses of such monsters as Lovecraft's Wilbur Whately. Meanwhile, Wordcraft of Oregon (PO Box 3235, La Grande, OR 97850) brings us *The Explanation* (trade, $9.95, 124 pages, ISBN 1-877655-25-2), a collection of Webb's inimitable short stories. What appeals most to me about these fictions is how life and art exchange precious fluids like mating bacteria, and how a sense of the true strangeness of the universe always erupts into the mundane lives of the protagonists. Webb exhibits a sure hand at parody, too, especially in "Looking Glass" which sends a Joe Friday-style cop on an interdimensional quest. With nods to Burroughs and Barthelme, Webb decocts his own line of word-elixers.

Who though would have guessed that Webb's first novel, *The Double* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $21.95, 256 pages, ISBN 0-312-19144-8) would resemble most closely the work of Philip José Farmer? I myself had not sussed out Webb's devotion to the Prophet of Peoria, but *The Double* is unmistakably indebted to such Farmer classics as *Blown* (1969) and *Image of the Beast* (1968), as well as PJF's newest, *Nothing Burns In Hell* (1998).

Game designer John Reynman, Austin recluse, wakes one morning to find his doppelgänger dead in his living room. This bizarre murder propels him into a subterranean existence where conspiracy theory overlaps with tantric sex. Enlisting the help of a sexy lawyer named Michelle and his ex-wife Cassilda, Reynman gradually learns the identity of the lookalike corpse and the dead man's connection to a mysterious society known as the Travelers, led by one Dr. David Niles. (Is "Niles" a sly reference to the TV hit *Frasier*? I wouldn't put it past Webb, who tosses in plenty of other pop culture allusions.) After many disturbing encounters with assorted loonies, in a funhouse showdown Reynman confronts Niles and learns just how much he has left to learn.

Webb's deadpan narration and philosophical asides sometimes remind me of Vonnegut, and there's a heavy Pynchon vibe as well. But the mix of kabbalistic karnality and kooky kadavers in the end evokes Farmer most strongly—and it's about time someone took up this particular gauntlet.

If David Lynch doesn't scoop up film options on *The Double*, this world's not in cosmic balance.

Vacuum Gulags

SF has long had an interest in how future societies would punish their malefactors and malcontents. From Heinlein's Coventry to Cordwainer Smith's Shayol, from Sheckley's Omega to Dick's Alphane Moon, many fine writers have envisioned a variety of schemes whereby the marriage of technology and law would open up new penal possibilities. Now one of SF's most visionary authors, George Zebrowski, gives us *Brute Orbits* (HarperPrism, hardcover, $23.00, 222 pages, ISBN 0-06-105026-1), the latest novel in

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this lineage, and it proves to be a worthy successor and innovator.

In the middle of the next century, mankind has successfully mined many asteroids, leaving them hollow shells which, with a little modification, are easily turned into inescapable prisons. Filled with all those "dregs" whom society has outlawed—from rapists to political dissidents, from murderers to thieves—these Rocks are sent, *sans* guards, on long cometary journeys (the "brute orbits" of the title), returning to the vicinity of Earth only at the end of the communal stipulated sentences of incarceration. Zebrowski's novel is a collage of vivid impressions from these assorted, sordid prisons. (Conditions and debate back on Earth are represented by extracts from the journals of Judge Overton, main administrator for the Rocks.) By focusing on the criminals and their new living conditions, Zebrowski succeeds in rubbing our noses in the harsh actions any society under assault by sociopaths must undertake in order to survive.

Zebrowski has always by temperament been inclined to follow the transcendentalism of Clarke and Stapledon and Blish, and this new book is no exception. His language and his perspective on the events of his narrative are elegaically lofty. A one-hundred-year jump partway through the book effectively kills off all the characters brought to life in the first portion of the novel, in order to limn the fate of the Rocks in the grand scheme of mankind's existence. And yet Zebrowski also never ceases to invest his individual characters with three-dimensional roundness. Consider this effective portrait:

Startling and sobering, Zebrowski's provocative novel should prick the consciences of all readers, as he slices open the veins of prisoners and warders alike, revealing the identical blood that flows on either side of the bars.

Legends and Lies

If Stephen King were able to write with any real grace, intelligence, comedic inventiveness, or concision, he might have boiled his whole Dark Tower series down to one slim volume, a volume perhaps resembling Robert Coover's *Ghost Town* (Henry Holt, hardcover, $24.00, 147 pages, ISBN 0-8050-5884-2). Like some mad fusion of *Gunsmoke*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Benny Hill*, *Ghost Town* rocks with slapstick violence (think of cartoonist Bill Plympton's work) and melancholy laughter. Stuffed to overflowing with parodic incidents, Coover's novel nonetheless succeeds in evoking real sympathy for its much-put-upon protagonist, a distillate of every luckless and overly principled high-plains drifter ever to cross the silver screen or printed page.

The book opens with our nameless sagebrush hero riding into town on his trusty steed after a hard desert crossing. But wait, the *town* is rolling up on *him*, not vice versa! This untethered scenery is merely the first and not even the most startling reversal of convention in Coover's narrative. As our close-mouthed and phlegmatic cowpoke adopts and casts aside role after role—sheriff, rustler, sheep-herder, wagon-train guide, bandit—he gradually assumes Christ-like or Osirian dimensions, complete with disciples and betrayers and foul-mouthed Magdalenes. The termination of his trials is, of course, Sisyphean.

Coover's prose, naturally, floats at his usual masterly level. At times recalling Lucius Shepard or William Burroughs, he always delivers crystalline action and beautiful im-

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agery. What's particularly striking this time is his flair with one-liners. During an Indian massacre, "the schoolmarm from the town up ahead [moves] among the fallen, treating their injuries, consoling the dying, keeping wounded and orphaned children distracted by teaching them their ABCs."

If the recent deaths of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers left you feeling a mite lonesome, saddle up *Ghost Town* before sundown, pardner!

The mind of a monster is anatomized and laid bare in Brian Evenson's *Father of Lies* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $22.00, 197 pages, ISBN 1-56858-116-5), and that unstable mind proves capable of producing hallucinations and effects that partake of the preternatural. Eldon Fochs, Provost of a Mormon-like church known as the Corporation of the Blood of the Lamb, is a pedophile murderer. Under his cloak of institutional religious respectability, Fochs continually walks a thin, suspenseful line between escape and capture for his crimes. Investigated by a psychoanalyst named Alexander Feshtig (Feshtig's first-person records form an edifying part of the narrative) and by the police, Fochs enjoys the aid and counsel of the Bloody-Head Man, an avatar of evil. How Fochs and his supernatural familiar baffle the authorities and whether they will ever be caught is Evenson's story.

Like Tom Disch's *The MD* (1991), *Father of Lies* is a harrowing trip through hell while perched atop the shoulders of a reprehensible character. Evenson employs expertly pruned mimetic prose and an abundance of crisp dialogue to insure that Fochs's evil will shine forth nakedly. But he is also capable of bravura surreal setpieces, such as a trial scene in which Fochs fights inner demons while on the stand. Short named sections, each a mini-drama, contribute to the swift flow of this ethical thriller. And like Sturgeon, Evenson inhabits even his villains so empathically that we never see them as alien, but as all-too-human. In this age when daily papers tell of crimes a hundred times more gory than those of Eldon Fochs, we need an artistically rich book like this to uncover the roots of such cruel abnormalities.

Untamed Silicontinent

Robert Charles Wilson's *Darwinia* (Tor, hardcover, $22.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-312-86038-2) starts out as a refreshingly different alternate history novel—atmospherically similar to Michael Connor's *Archangel* (1995)—then mutates a third of the way through into something even stranger and richer. Be warned that my review will reveal this twist.

In 1912, Guilford Law of Boston is turning fourteen, and his timeline is about to be warped. Without warning, the Miracle occurs: all Europe instantly vanishes, to be replaced or overlaid by a virgin alien landscape rich in non-sentient life. Soon christened Darwinia, this new land upsets the entire global economy and politics, exerting a magnetic tug on settlers, adventurers and expatriates, not the least of whom is Guilford. Eight years later, Guilford, married and a father, conducts his family to a frontier London, himself a part of the Finch expedition to explore the interior of Darwinia. In that exotic and dangerous land, Guilford will begin to learn the true nature of the Miracle.

What Wilson reveals in a section titled "Interlude" is that Guilford and his entire universe are an end-of-time simulation, part of the by-now well-known Tipler scenario. Theoretically, the virtual reality known as the Archive that gives

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Guilford life should be a flawless historically valid recreation. Unfortunately, the ontological substrate has been infected by complex viruses called psilife or psions. They are intent on colonizing the Archive to survive the heat death of the universe. The psions are responsible for Darwinia, and certain key humans are either their opponents or allies. Guilford learns he is one of the former, but rejects the role. Only after twenty-five years of denial does he finally enroll in the fight to purge the Archives, a battle that brings him full circle to his first encounter with the mystery of Darwinia.

Having pulled the carpet out from under us while we thought we were enjoying a simple uchronia, Wilson might have lost our faith. (Robert Reed did something similar in his *An Exaltation of Larks* [1995] with equal success.) But it's a tribute to his skills that we continue to care about Guilford and his colorful cronies despite their virtual existence, in a realm where death is really just "strange, deep numbers." Never losing sight of quotidian human touchstones, no matter what bizarre higher-level plots are afoot, Wilson in this book reminds me most strongly of the much-missed Clifford Simak. Simak's sense of the homely mingled with the cosmic, of simple men and women persisting in the face of alien demands, runs strongly through Wilson's finely wrought prose. He is a wise and capable heir to Simak's stellar pastoralism, and *Darwinia* deserves much praise.

Terabytes of Tales

All too briefly, I offer endorsements of six single-author collections, each of which has given me immense pleasure recently. Taken together, these volumes represent some of the best SF available today, and showcase the roots and current foliage of our vigorously flourishing field.

From Cambrian Publications (**www.cambrianpubs.com**) arrives Rachel Pollack's *Burning Sky* (hardcover, $30.00, 410 pages, ISBN 1-878914-04-9), a gorgeously designed compilation containing all of this multitalented author's short fiction. Witty, sexy, blending glee, anger, and wonder, Pollack's stories bounce from one end of chaos's creation to the other, taking you along for the ride. My favorite: "The Girl Who Went to the Rich Neighborhood," a very contemporary fable.

The title of Kathe Koja's viscerally eerie collection, *Extremities* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $20.00, 200 pages, ISBN 1-56858-122-X) perfectly embodies her trademark twin concerns: the human body and catastrophic situations. In bloody offerings like "The Neglected Garden" and "Queen of Angels," Koja, flanked by such tutelary spirits as Joseph Cornell and Sylvia Plath, follows the thread of madness deep into the labyrinth of self-knowledge.

"I don't write much science fiction," claims Liz Hand in an afterword to one of the impactful stories in her *Last Summer at Mars Hill* (HarperPrism, trade, $13.00, 324 pages, ISBN 0-06-105348-1). She's being modest in denying her brightly colored, sensitively shattering fantasies the mantle of SF. No matter, though, when it comes to our enjoying such contemporary explorations of mythic concerns as "Justice," in which a tabloid reporter encounters a vengeful goddess. Hand's sly prose and groundedness in the here and now combine with her keen eye for the supernatural to deliver a dozen diamonds from some kobold's mine.

With admirable energy and dedication, NESFA Press (PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701), this time

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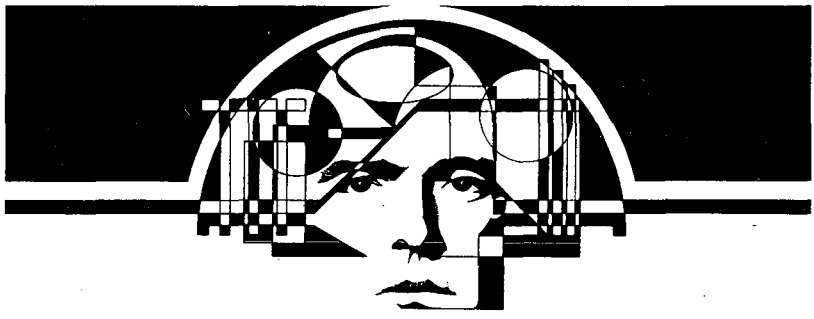
under the editorship of Priscilla Olson, births another comprehensive collection as exciting as its earlier Kornbluth volume. Charles Harness's *An Ornament to His Profession* (hardcover, $25.00, 542 pages, ISBN 1-886778-09-4) deluges the reader with spacetime mysticism full of offhand epiphanies, what Brian Aldiss once called "Widescreen Baroque." The original story herein, "Lethary Fair," reads like Lafferty crossed with Sheckley, showing Harness still in fine fettle at age eighty-three.

Noted scholar S.T. Joshi has compiled Lord Dunsany's wistful and lapidary fictions concerning the mythical realm of Pegāna into a single indispensable volume: *The Complete Pegāna* (Chaosium, trade, $12.95, 239 pages, ISBN 1-56882-116-6). Gods and men dance across the meadows of Time to a music both sad and brave. The scary yet arcadian "Idle Days on the Yann" alone is worth the price of admission. (Chaosium, 950-A 56th Street, Oakland, CA 94608.)

Stuffed with love, respect, and a determination to preserve wonders from rust and moth and inattention, *The Avram Davidson Treasury* (Tor, hardcover, $27.95, 447 pages, ISBN 0-312-86729-8) offers hours of keen reading pleasure. Editors Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis have assembled a heavyweight cast of introducers—Le Guin, Wolfe, Pohl, and dozens of others—to spotlight Davidson's inimitable stories, each of which dazzles in a different way. Spotting "The House the Blakeneys Built" on the contents page, I had an instant flashback of pure joy to my own discovery of Davidson some thirty years gone. Experience him afresh or renewed yourself. ○



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Best of the Nineties: Panel Discussion on Fiction
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Connie Willis on this year's **Nebula Collection** March 23, 1999 @ 9:00 P.M. EST

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The spring con(vention) season gets into high gear this month, coast to coast. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 1999

26–28—**SheVaCon.** For info, write: **Box 416, Verona VA 24482.** Or phone: **(540) 886-2154** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). E-mail to **sheva@adelphia.net.** Con will be held in: Staunton VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ingleside Resort. Guests will include: Steve White, R. Wayt Smith, Dave Arneson, Antoine & J. Evans, Rikk Jacobs.

26–28—**MarsCon., Box 11414, Minneapolis MN 55111. (E-mail) marscon99@hotmail.com.** Radisson South, Bloomington MN.

26–28—**Fantasm. (864) 503-0780 (hotel). (E-mail) info@fantasm.org.** Quality Hotel, Spartanburg SC. Lewitt, G. Watson.

26–28—**Escapade. (E-mail) escapade9@geocities.com.** Holiday Inn, Goleta (Santa Barbara) CA. Adult-content fanzines.

26–28—**FalTorPan, 26 A Napier Ave., Southend-on-Sea SS1 1LZ, UK, ftpcon@aol.com.** Britannia, Birmingham UK. Media.

26–28—**Redemption. (01202) 693039. (E-mail) redemptioninfo@smofcon.com.** Int'l Hotel, Ashford UK. Blake's 7/Babylon 5.

26–28—**Chronicles. dsimons206@aol.com.** Grand Hotel, Birmingham England. Wingfield, Pelka, Testory. Highlander.

27—**Slipstream. (706) 812-7258.** LaGrange College, LaGrange GA. B. Sterling, Mary D. Russell, P. DiFilippo, M. Bishop.

MARCH 1999

4–7—**World Horror Con. (770) 523-6321 (fax). horrorcon@aol.com.** Marriott North Central, Atlanta GA. M. Bishop, Shirley.

5–7—**LunaCon. (E-mail) lunacon@lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Vernor Vinge, Bob Eggleton, Anthony R. Lewis.

5–7—**ConSonance. (E-mail) rhiannon@dandelion.com.** Biltmore, San Jose CA. Clam Chowder, Celia Eng. SF folksinging.

6–7—**Vulkon. (954) 434-6060. joemotes@aol.com.** Baltimore MD. Marina Sirtis. Commercial Star Trek event.

11–13—**Life, the Universe, & Everything, 3163 JHKB, Provo UT 84602. (801) 378-2456.** Brigham Young U. K. Anderson.

17–21—**IAFA, 500 NW 20th, HU-50, B-9, FAU, Boca Raton FL 33431. (954) 475-6747.** Hilton, Ft. Lauderdale FL. Academic.

19–21—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (601) 435-5217. (E-mail) committee@coastcon.org.** President Casino Resort.

19–21—**MillenniCon, 143 Schloss Lane, Dayton OH 45418. (513) 933-0452.** Blue Ash, Cincinnati OH. Bova, First Fandom.

19–21—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. (E-mail) info@technicon.org.** Best Western Red Lion.

19–21—**RevelCon, Box 980744, Houston TX 77098. (713) 526-5625.** Media fanzines.

19–21—**StellarCon, Box 4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27412. (336) 334-3159.** Holiday Inn Market Sq., High Point NC.

19–21—**FanimeCon, Box 8068, San Jose CA 95155. (800) 538-6818 (hotel).** Wyndham Hotel. Hastings. Japanese animation.

19–21—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (706) 769-7502. (E-mail) moc@negia.net.** Athens GA. Media/comics.

19–21—**Star Fury, 148A Queensway, Bayswater London W2 6LY, UK.** Heathrow Park Hotel. Tracy Scoggins. Media.

AUGUST 1999

26–29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. Pournelle. The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $100.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2–6—**AussieCon 3, Box 688, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US$155.

AUGUST 2000

31–Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $140.

AUGUST 2001

30–Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, 402 Huntingdon Pk. #2001, Rockledge PA 19046.** Downtown, Phila. PA. WorldCon. $125.

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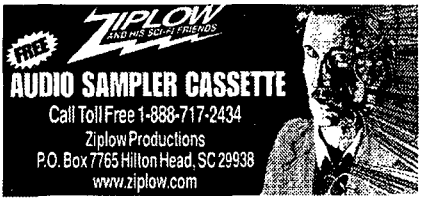

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NEXT ISSUE

MONTH LEAD STORY

William Barton, author of the popular story "Age of Aquarius," which was a Hugo finalist a couple of years back, and who last appeared here with "Down in the Dark" in our December issue, returns to these pages next month with our intense and vivid May cover story, "Soldier's Home." In this one, he tells the compelling story of a heartsick and battle-weary veteran of an unimaginably strange high-tech future war who returns to an abandoned space colony, one that has been drifting lost and deserted among the stars for generations, to face again some old and implacable enemies, and to reaffirm the truth of that old saying about how You Can't Go Home Again . . . or perhaps to learn that maybe you can—but only if you're willing to pay the price. This one is powerful, hard-hitting, and hard-edged—don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hot new writer **Kage Baker** takes us back in time to Old San Francisco, to the breathless moments just before the Great San Francisco Earthquake, for a taut and suspenseful tale of conspiracy, conflict, political intrigue, revenge, and redemption in the shadow of onrushing catastrophe, in an intricate and eloquent new Company novella, "Son Observe the Time"; acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford** shows us that sometimes it's better not to know what's going to happen to us in the future, in a disquieting study of what it means to be "The Oracle"; **Robert Reed**, one of our most popular and prolific writers, returns to wonder (as many have over the years) what the vintners buy one half so precious as the stuff they sell, and takes us along to watch them set up shop in the untouched territory of "Human Bay"; **Phillip C. Jennings** returns after a long absence with a poignant look at the most basic human values of community that are left after everything else is lost, in "Old Glory"; and **Don D'Ammassa** makes an affecting *Asimov's* debut, taking us to a distant planet in company with an intrepid band of homesteaders who are determined to make a go of it, even in the face of such enigmatic and potentially deadly phenomenon as the relentless and unstoppable "Wormdance."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column asks "The Best is Yet To Be...Right?"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our May 1999 issue on sale on your newsstand on April 6, 1999, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our new Asimov's Internet website, at **http://www.asimovs.com**), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in 1999!

And, with the holidays coming up, keep in mind that a subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great Christmas gift, too!

COMING SOON

new Martian stories by **Kim Stanley Robinson**, plus great new stories by **David Marusek, Michael Swanwick, Geoffrey A. Landis, Esther M. Friesner, Walter Jon Williams, Kage Baker, Brian Stableford, Eliot Fintushel, Gregory Feeley, Robert Reed, Jane Yolen, Tom Purdom, Andy Duncan,** and many others.

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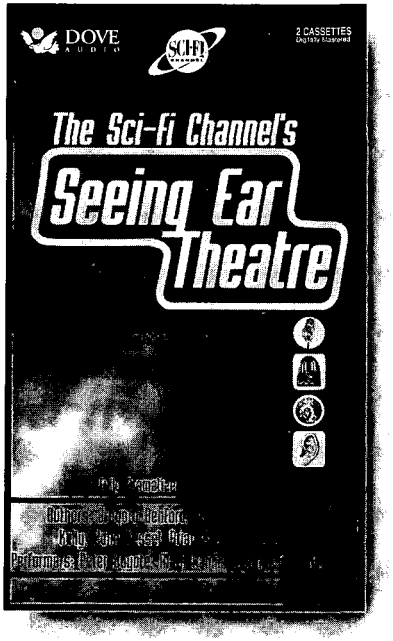

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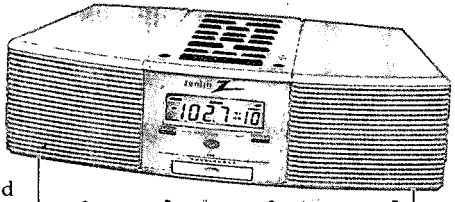

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